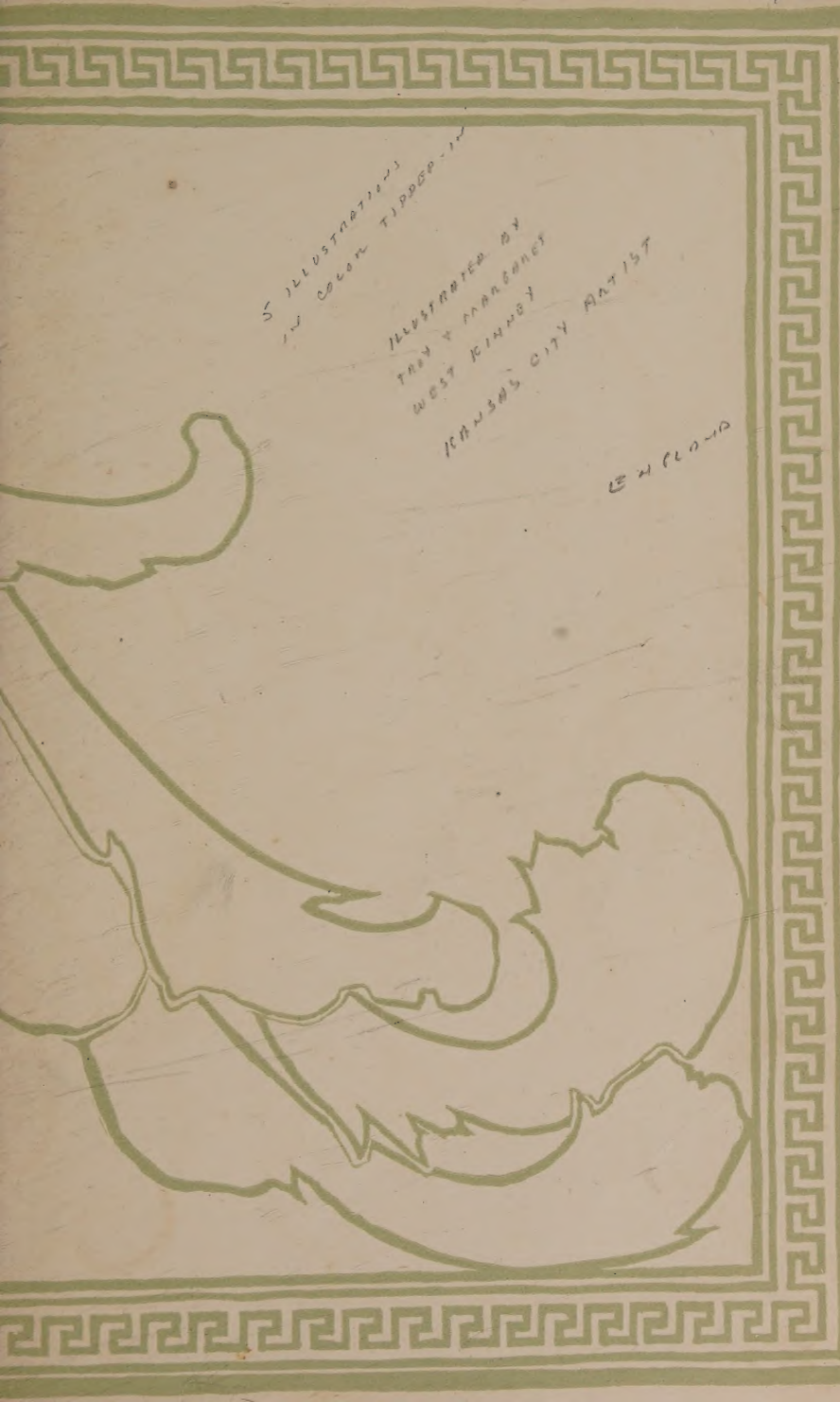
NICANOR
TELLER OF TALES

C. BRYSON TAYLOR



VICANOR TELLER OF TALES

1907.

"In a physical ecstasy he spoke out that which clamored at his lips." [Page 44]

NICANOR TELLER OF TALES

A STORY OF ROMAN BRITAIN

BY

C. BRYSON TAYLOR

AVTHOR OF
"IN THE DWELLINGS OF THE WILDERNESS"

HAVING PICTVRES AND DESIGNS BY
TROY AND MARGARET WEST KINNEY

CHICAGO
A.C. McCLVRG & CO.
1906

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C. H. B.

To you, whose love did come
And oft did sing to me,
When I was working in the furrows.

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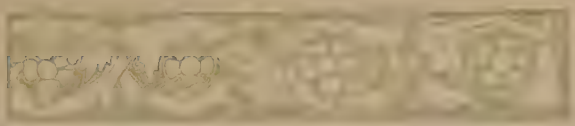
CHARACTERS

EUDEMIUS, a Roman lord living in Britain
VARIA, his daughter
LIVINIUS, a Roman citizen, a boyhood friend of Eudemius
MARIUS, his son, of the Roman legions in Gaul
MARCUS SILENUS POMPONIUS, Count of the Saxon Shore
AURELIUS MENOTUS, duumvir of Anderida
FELIX, his son
CAIUS JULIUS VALENS, a Roman citizen
(Guests of Eudemius)
JULIA
NIGIDIA
PAULA
GRATIA
(Roman girls, daughters of the guests of Eudemius)
NERISSA, nurse to Varia
HITO, master of the household of Eudemius
CHLORIS, of all nations, living upon Thorney
SADA, a Saxon
EUNICE, a Greek
(inmates of her house)
ELDRIS, a Briton, a convert to Christianity
WARDO, a Saxon, a slave in the house of Eudemius
VALERIUS, a Roman, a soldier of fortune
TOBIAS, a Hebrew, a worker in ivory
RATHUMUS, a British peasant, bound to the soil
SUSANNA, a Hebrew woman, his wife
NICANOR, a story-teller, their son
WULF, the Red, a Saxon free-lance
CEAWLIN, a Saxon chieftain
FATHER AMBROSE, of the Christian church
NICODEMUS, the One-Eyed, a British freedman
MYLEIA, his wife
MARCUS, a slave in the house of Eudemius
BALBUS, a convict
JUNCINA, a fish-wife on Thorney
SOSIA, her daughter

A flower-girl, a Saxon singer, slaves, trades-folk, soldiers of the military police; guards and overseers of the mines, and miners; Roman nobles and patrician women; Saxon men-at-arms, and men of the outland nations

Scene: Britain in the last days of Roman power
Time: between A.D. 410 and 446



LIST OF TOWNS AND RIVERS

WITH THEIR MODERN SITES AND NAMES

Abus Flumen	Humber River.
Ad Fines	Broughing, Hertfordshire.
Anderida	Pevensey.
Aquæ Solis	Bath.
Bibracte	*Unknown.*
Caledonia	Scotland.
Calleva	Silchester.
Corinium	Cirencester.
Cunetio	Folly Farm, near Marlborough.
Deva	Chester.
Dubræ	Dover.
Eboracum	York.
Gobannium	Abergavenny.
Glevum	Gloucester.
Isca Silurum	Carleon.
Leucarum	Llychwr, county of Glamorgan.
Londinium	London.
Noviomagus	Holwood Hill, parish of Bromley.
Pontes	Staines
Portus Magnus	Porchester.
Ratæ	Leicester.
Regnum	Chichester.
Rutupiæ	Richborough
Sabrina Flumen	Severn River.
Serica	China.
Tamesis Flumen	Thames River.
Tripontium	*Near* Lilburne.
Uriconium	Wroxeter.
Urus Flumen	Ouse River.

THE MANTLE OF MELCHIOR

BOOK I

NICANOR:

TELLER OF TALES

Book I

THE MANTLE OF MELCHIOR

I

ICANOR the story-teller was the son of Rathumus the wood-cutter, who was the son of Razis the worker in bronze, who was the son of Melchior the story-teller. So that Nicanor came honestly by his gift, and would even believe that his great-grandsire had handed it down to him by special act of bequest.

Now Rathumus the wood-cutter, tall and gaunt and fierce-eyed, coming home with his fagots on his shoulder in the gloam of the evening, when the fireflies twinkled low among the marshes, saw Nicanor on the side of the hill against the sky, sitting with hands clasped about his knees, crooning to the stars. Rathumus bowed his head and entered his house, and to Susanna, his wife, he said:

"The gift of our father Melchior hath fallen upon the child. I have seen it coming this long, long while. Now

he singeth to the stars. When they have heard him and have taught him, he will go and sing to men. He is our child no longer, wife. His life hath claimed him."

Susanna, the mother, said:

"He will be a man among men. He will be a great man among great men. It may be that the Lord Governor will send for him. But — oh, my boy — my boy!"

Rathumus answered gravely:

"Pray the holy gods he will not misuse his power!"

Presently Nicanor came in, with the spell not yet shaken off him, wanting his supper. A smaller image of his father he was, lean and shock-headed, with gray steady eyes changing from the stillness of childhood's innocence to the depth and wonder of dawning knowledge.

Rathumus said:

"What hast been doing, boy?"

Nicanor stretched like one arousing from sleep.

"I know not," he answered. "Perhaps I slept out under the moon last night and she hath turned my head. — Father, I have been thinking. When I am become a man I shall do great things. Even you have told me that the destiny of a man's life lieth between his hands."

"Son," Rathumus said quickly, "remember also that men's hands lie between the hands of the gods, even as a slave's between the hands of his over-lord. Keep it in mind, child, that thou art very young, that thy first strength hath not yet come upon thee; and strive not to teach to others what thou hast not learned thyself. For that way lies mockery and the scorn of men."

"Now I do not understand where thy words would lead," Nicanor said; and his gray eyes, in the wavering

torch-light, were doubtful. "I teach no one. Perhaps — it was not I who slept under the moon, after all."

For he was young, and though his parents saw what had come upon him, he himself saw not.

So Nicanor had his supper, of black bean-porridge, taking no thought of those parents' loving thought for him; and later climbed the ladder to the loft where he slept. After a while, Susanna, yearning over her boy in this, the first dim hour of his awakening, — yearning all the more since she saw that he was following blindly the workings of his own appointed fate, without any sense or knowledge of it himself, — went up the ladder also and sat beside him, thinking him asleep. But Nicanor put out a hand and slid it into hers, and shuffled in his straw until he was close against her. She gathered him into her arms, his shaggy head upon her breast, and rocked him to and fro in the darkness. To-morrow he would go where this fate of his called him; but this last night he must be hers, all hers, who had borne him only to give him up. Nicanor, stupid with sleep and comfort, murmured drowsily, and she bent close over him to listen.

"Mother, three nights ago my father spoke of Melchior, and the name hath lingered in my head. Who was he? What was he?"

"Thy father's father's sire," she told him. She saw it coming; the chains which bound his heart to hers were stretching. "He was a teller of tales, son, and — thy father thinks a fold of his mantle hath fallen upon thee. He it was who was first servus in the family of our lord. Little one, tell mother; what thoughts hast thou when the night comes down and the wide earth hushes

into drowsy crooning? Hast ever felt dreams stirring at thy heart-strings like chords of faintest music?"

"Mother!" Nicanor cried, and tightened his arms about her. "Thou hast it — the words — the words! Tell me how to do it! Thoughts I have, and visions so far away that they are gone before I know them — but the words! I cannot say the things I would, so that they ring. Teach it me, then!"

Susanna laughed, and stroked her boy's hot head.

"Words I have, little son," she said softly, "but I have no tune to sing them to. A woman hath but one tune, and that is ever in the same key. One song, and one only, in her life she hath, and when that is ended, she is dumb. But please the good God! thou 'lt have what lies behind the words and alone makes them of value; the thought which is the foundation-stone to build upon. And then the words will come also. What visions hast thou seen, sonling?"

"Mother, I cannot tell, for my mouth is empty though my head rings. Always it begins as though a curtain of mist were swept rolling back from the face of the world, and I see below me vague mountains and broad lonely wastes, and gray cities sleeping in dead moonlight, for it is ever night. I see clouds that reach away to the rim of the earth, and it is all as in a dream, and — and so deep within me that I lose it before I know it. — Oh, I cannot tell!"

He stirred restlessly and nestled his head deeper into her breast, and she stroked his hair in silence. When he spoke again there was a new note in his boy's voice.

"Mother, I too will be a teller of tales, even as was that sire of my father's sire whose name was Melchior.

For in that there is to me all joy, and no pain nor sorrow at all. And I shall be great, greater than he and greater than those who shall come after me."

Susanna laid her hand across his mouth.

"Hush thee, for the love of dear Heaven, hush! That is boasting, and good never came of that! Oh, little son of mine, listen to me, thy mother, — it may be for the last time, — and keep my words always in a corner of thy heart. They shall be as a charm to keep all danger from thee. Pray to God nightly, the dear God of Whom I have tried to teach thee; keep thy hands from blood, thy body from wanton sin, and thy tongue from guile. So shalt thou be pure and thy tales prosper; for untainted fruit never blossomed from a dunghill. Remember that the Lord loveth all his creatures even the same as he loveth thee. As thou hast good and evil both within thee, so have others; wherefore judge them in mercy as thou wouldst thyself. And judge thyself in sternness as thou wouldst them; so shalt thou keep the balance true. Now thou art sleeping through my preaching — well, never mind! Kiss thy mother, dear one, and I will go."

She descended the ladder; and Nicanor's voice came sleepily muffled through the straw.

"All the same I shall be great — greater than that old man who was before me — greater than kings — greater than any who shall come after — "

He slept, and the moonlight streamed upon him in a flood of silver.

And below, at Rathumus' side, lay Susanna, the mother, and stared wide-eyed and wakeful through the darkness.

II

NICANOR sat beside the fire, his hands clasping his knees, his eyes glowing in the ruddy leaping of the flames. Around him on the moor squatted a band of belated roving shepherds, who from all the country round were bringing their flocks to fold for the Winter. About the fire, at discreet intervals, the sheep were herded, each flock by itself. Around every huddle a black figure circled, staff in hand, hushing wakeful disturbers into peace. The shepherds ringing the fire sprawled carelessly; uncouth rough men with shaggy beards and keen eyes, their features thrown into sharp relief against the light. Farther off, small groups, close-sitting, cast dice upon a sheepskin with muttered growls of laughter. The musky smell of the animals tinged the first chill of Autumn which hung in the air. Around them the moor stretched away, vast and silent, broken into ridges filled with impenetrable shadows until it melted into the mystery of the night. Over the world's darkness a slender moon, sharp-horned, wandered through rifting clouds.

Nicanor's voice rose and fell with the crackling flames. His eyes gleamed, his face quivered; the men within

hearing hung upon his words. Gradually the dicers' laughter died; one by one they left their clusters and joined the circle at the fire. Nicanor saw, and his heart swelled high. This was what he loved, — to fare forth at night and come upon such a crowd of drovers, or it might be wood-cutters or charcoal burners; to begin his chant abruptly, in the midst of conversation; to see his listeners draw close and closer, gazing wide-eyed, half in awe; to move them to laughter or to tears, as suited him; to sway them as the marsh winds swayed the reeds. At times, when this sense of power shook him, he took a savage delight in seeing them turn, one to another, great bearded men, sobbing, gasping for breath, striving for self-control, — simple-hearted children of moor and forest, whose emotions he could mould as a potter moulds his clay. He could have laughed aloud, he could have sung for sheer joy and triumph, to watch this thing. Again, he would make them shiver at his tales of the world of darkness — shiver and glance from side to side into the outer blackness, with eyes gleaming white in the firelight. For it was a superstitious age, in which every field, every hearth-stone, had its presiding genius for good or ill; and there were many things of which men spoke with bated breath and two fingers out.

Nicanor ended his chant:

"So this man died, being unpunished, and went away into a great country which was a field of flowers. And in the midst of the field was a city wherein the man would enter. But even as he walked through this field of flowers, he saw that out of the flowers ran blood, and the flowers spoke and cried out upon him because of

that thing which he had done when he was upon the earth. And the man was sorely frightened."

There was a mutter and a stir among the crowd. A black bulk heaved itself up between Nicanor and the firelight, and a swollen voice cried out:

"Now by Christ His cross, how comes it that this snipe of a stripling may speak from his mouth of what lieth beyond the grave? For this is death, and death is a matter concerning Holy Church alone. By what right doth he tell us of what she says no mortal may know?"

Cries from his mates interrupted.

"Nay, Rag; shut thy gaping mouth and leave the lad in peace! And so — and so — what then befell this wicked man, son?"

But Rag was not minded to be put aside so lightly.

"I say 't is wrong!" he bawled. "No man, without warrant, may thus blab of what goeth on beyond the grave!"

A voice seconded him from the outer ring, but dubiously.

"I think the Saxon right! How may we know if this lad speaks true of that which comes to pass hereafter? Boy, what earnest canst give that this thing happened so?"

But another shouted:

"In the name of the gods, Rag, get thee to sleep once more, thou stupidest lout in Britain! It is a scurvy trick to waken thus at the wrong time and trumpet thy nonsense in such fashion. Good youth canst not skip that bit for peace's sake, and get on to the next part?"

Rag's voice blared into this one's speech.

"Nay, now I am awake, I'll not sleep again until I know if a lie hath waked me. For if it be not the truth, it is a lie, and a lie shall have short shrift with me!"

The men, stirred by the tale, took sides. A gale of conversation sprang up. Some wished the story to go on; others would know by what means this lanky youth could tell of what was to come to pass hereafter. They knew not the word imagination. Consequently fierce arguments arose. The burly cause of the uproar curled up and went quietly to sleep once more, leaving his fellows to settle for themselves the questions he had propounded. It is the way of his kind. High words fanned the spark of their excitement. Two met with blows; one stumbled into the hot embers. He cursed, and the light flashed on a drawn blade. Instantly the noise redoubled. Mingled with it was the bleating of frightened sheep, the oaths of drovers who strove to check incipient stampedes. Nicanor hugged himself with joy. If but his father could be there to see! Melchior, that wonderful great-sire of his, could not have so stirred men that they were ready even for blood and violence. He, Nicanor, could; wherefore he was greater than Melchior. His blood leaped at the thought; he wished to proclaim his exultation to the world.

But things soon took a different turn.

In the confusion, Rag, lying almost beneath his comrades' feet, got himself kicked. He leaped to his feet, dazed, roaring like a bull, and, stupid lout that he was, took unreasoning vengeance upon the first object which caught his eye. This chanced to be Nicanor.

"See what thou hast brought us to, son of perdition!" he cried. "But for thee and thy fool's tales we should be lying asleep like good men and true. This is thy work, with thy talk on heaven and hell and flowers which vomit blood. God's death! Heard ever man the like? If thou knowest not of what thou pratest, thou hast lied, and that deserves a beating. If thou dost know, thou hast the black art of magic, — an evil-doer, with familiars who tell thee things not to be known of earth; and that deserves a flaying!"

His voice was loud. His partisans took up his cry. Nicanor found himself surrounded. He became enraged; forgot that he himself with his wizard tongue had worked them into a very fitting state for any outbreak. That the emotions he had aroused should be turned against himself was a monstrous thing. He drew his knife; one seized it from his hand and flung it into the heart of the fire. Black figures danced around him; he was lifted off his feet by their rush; flung down, trampled upon, bruised, kicked, beaten. Men, losing all thought of him, fought over his head, clamoring old pagan creeds and shrieking aloud their theories concerning the Seven Mysteries of the Church. They differed wildly. From the criticism of a romantic tale, the discussion flamed into a religious war.

One with a broken head fell senseless near Nicanor. He, in scarcely better case, turned and squirmed until he got himself covered with the body; so saved his ribs and perhaps his life.

The combat ended, after a lapse of minutes, as abruptly as it had started. A cry arose from the hurrying guardians of the flocks:

"The sheep! Look to the sheep! They scatter!"

The animals, frightened by the uproar into panic, broke from their cordon and bolted into the darkness. Religion was forgotten on the instant; men in the act of giving a blow swung around and fled after their property. Seeing this out of the tail of his eye, Nicanor crawled from beneath the protecting body. He stood upright beside the deserted fire, panting, glaring, his clothes in tatters. Blood flowed from his nose, and from a cut upon his temple. He was a sorry sight. He lifted his clenched fist and shook it at his vanishing assailants.

"By Christ His cross!" he swore, repeating Rag's oath, "after this I shall make you believe what I tell you, though I say that your hell is heaven and your heaven hell. You have bruised me, beaten me, because of what? Something too high for your sodden brains to know! You have flouted me; now I shall flout you. I shall make you fear me, tremble at my words — ay, kiss the very ground beneath my feet. You shall learn to fear me and my power; you shall cringe like the curs you are!"

He went home in a quiver of rage and hate and shame, wounded in his body, still more sorely in his dignity, and told his mother he was going away. Where, he did not know. This was a small detail, since to him all the world was new. Folk had faith in the manifestations of Providence in those days; Rathumus and Susanna believed they heard Fate speaking by the mouth of their angry son. Susanna's eyes filled with tears. Rathumus nodded his great head gravely and slowly. Nicanor, overflowing with his wrongs, strode up and down the

hard earth floor in a passion. Again he gave tongue to his lamentations.

"I am stronger than they — I shall conquer! Thou shalt see! I shall make them acknowledge that I, son of Rathumus, am greater than they. This shall be my revenge, and though it take me all the years of my life, I shall win to it by fair means or foul."

"Son, son!" Rathumus said sternly. "Speak not thus rashly. For the gods, and the gods alone, is vengeance."

But Susanna took her boy to his own loft, and there comforted him, motherwise.

"Thou wilt yet get the better of them all, my son. That they should have dared to treat thee so! But oh, be careful, for my sake! Now hearken. I will have thy father pray that our gracious lord permit thee to go to Christian Saint Peter's church, on Thorney, which is called the Bramble Isle, to learn a trade. Though he be no believer in the Faith, our lord is a good man, merciful unto us, his slaves, and I doubt not will give consent. Then seek there a man by name of Tobias, a colonus and a worker in ivory for the good Christian priests. He, it may be, will aid thee for sake of her who is thy mother."

She stopped, then, and looked into his face. But he met her eyes without a change, and never thought to question what her words might mean. For he was very young; also his mother was his mother. So that Susanna smiled, for pure joy and happiness, and said:

"He is a wise man, with goodly store of wealth. Also hath he been in far strange countries, and seen right marvellous things. And he will take thee to learn of him, if so be thou wilt say thou art son to Rathumus

and Susanna his wife. And so wilt thou become great, and very wise, and loving."

So in the end, Nicanor started off alone in the world, with his parents' blessing, which was all they had to give him, to find out whither this Fate of his had called him.

III

THUS it was that Nicanor left his home in the gray northlands, up by the rolling hills and the barren moors which lay under the great Wall of Hadrian; and journeyed down the long road which led ever southward to Londinium. Past Eboracum, on the Urus, that "other Rome," where the Governor of Britain dwelt, famous as the station of the Sixth Legion, called the Victorious, the flower of the Roman army, which men said had been there for upwards of three hundred years. He crossed the wide river Abus, and thought it the ocean of which he had heard tales; he stole at stations and begged at farms, and drank in all that he could see and hear.

Over hills and through valleys the great road ran, straightaway for league upon league, turning aside for no obstacle, invincible as its builders, ancient and enduring. It crossed rivers, it clove through darkling woods, it traversed wide and lonely wastes, and led past walled towns, worn by the feet of marching legions, scored with the grooves of wheels. And even as across the world all roads led to Rome, so here did all roads lead to Londinium, and therefore to Thorney on Tamesis.

And Londinium was no longer the collection of mud huts filled with blue-painted Britons, of which dim tales were told. For under Roman rule fair Britain had cast half off the shroud of her brutish early days, and blossomed into a civilization such as she never before had known, and would not know again for many hundred years. One passing glimpse of light she caught — even though it had its shadows — before the veil shut down once more with the coming of the Saxons. For, though Roman rule in Britain was said to end with the fourth century, Roman influence, Roman customs, Roman laws, survived and were paramount during the years of independence which followed, until throttled by the slowly tightening hand of Saxon barbarism. Then the old dark times returned.

The Romans were hard taskmasters, but the task they had was hard. They were often merciless, but those beneath them had been wild beasts to tame. They were in power supreme and absolute, and they lived in ease and plenty upon the toil of native serfs and bondsmen. Fair villas, stately palaces, costly foods and fine raiment — all the luxuries those old days knew were theirs. Under them was the mass of the native population, staggering beneath their burden of taxation, bound to the soil, often absolute slaves, who spent their lives toiling in brickfields, in quarries, in mines, and in forests, living in straw-thatched cabins upon the lands of masters who paid no wage. When there was rebellion, these masters knew how to deal punishment swift and sure; when there was submission, they gave kindness and reward. Had Rome not been as strong as even in her decline she was, Romans could not have held Britain as long as

they did. For on sea and land, on the verge of the civilization they maintained, were restless tribes, Scots, Picts, and Saxons, seizing every pretext, every moment of unguardedness, for encroachment and disturbance.

So that their stern discipline was necessary, and not without results which went for further good. Under Roman rule all the surface of the land was changed. Great towns, walled and fortified, rose on the sites of ditch-surrounded villages. Marshes were drained, bridges were built, and rivers banked; forests were cleared and waste lands reclaimed. More than all, the land was tilled and rendered productive, so that Britain became the most important grain province of the empire. Romans found in Britain a scant supply of corn, grasses on which the cattle fed, wild plums, a few nuts and berries. They brought to Britain fruits and vegetables from many lands beyond the seas; from Italy gooseberries, chestnuts, and apples; walnuts from Gaul; apricots, peaches, and pears from Asia. Paved roads webbed the island, wide and well-drained, by which bodies of troops could be massed at any given point with incredible rapidity. Fortifications were built and in the north walls of solid masonry were thrown across the country from the Oceanus Ibernicus to the Oceanus Germanicus, for the determent of common foes.

That upon which Rome once set her seal could never wholly lose the mark; must remain bound to her by ties, which, stretching across the centuries, would link the future to the past. In spite of the bitterness of her defeat and ruin, and because she still was Rome, she was mighty enough to leave precious gifts to the peoples who should come after her. To Britain, because Britain

had been her own, she left many legacies great and small: the sonorous richness of her speech, soon corrupted to make for a new world a new speech as noble; and more than all, she left the word of her mighty law, proudest monument ever reared by mortal hands to a nation's glory. Rome's sons builded well for her; and the labor of their hearts and hands was not for the day alone, but for the ages. Towns yet to rise upon the ashes of her stately cities would find their model in her municipal government, and in her laws concerning the taxation of land and the distribution of personal and real estate. Old customs she left to be handed down to those who should sit in her sons' places, — the luctus of widows, who for a full year of widowhood might not wed again; the names of her deities she gave to the days of the planetary week. Her superstitions and folk-lore, deep-rooted, survived and lingered long among many nations: the old sorcery of the waxen image of an enemy transfixed by bodkins for the torment of that enemy; the belief in the were-wolf (one of the oldest of Roman traditions); the association of the yew tree with mourning and the passing of human souls.

Britain, with all her virgin wealth unmined, furnished Rome with enormous food supplies; sent many thousand men to serve with Roman armies on the continent; and received the colonists, called auxiliaries, brought thither in accordance with Rome's invariable policy of transplanting to the land of one nation captives from another. Thus the population of Britain, composed of people from nearly every race or tribe which has been subdued by Rome, was strangely heterogeneous, yet as strangely fused. It was Romanized; the national

individuality of its units was lost in that of their conqueror. But as Rome destroyed the nationality of her captives, so in time she inevitably destroyed her own. If they were Romanized, she was Gothicized and Gaulicized. But by this means only was the circulation of her life-currents maintained to the uttermost branches of the empire. That great empire, age-old, rotting inwardly almost to decay, was vitalized, as it were galvanically, against her approaching dissolution by the blood of her colonies. In the throes of hierarchical government, torn by three irreconcilable religions, — polytheistic, Julian or Augustan, and Christian, — she had no strength to spare for these outsiders when her own life was at stake. The story of Roman Britain is the old story which history repeats down all the ages: Rome sacrificed one part of Europe that the whole might not be lost, and offered up the few for the good of the greater number.

For in those dark days from the second century of the Christian era until near the close of the fifth, when came the last stage of the struggle and the extinction of the Empire of the West, the world seemed tottering to its ruin. Kingdoms shook and crumbled to their fall; new powers strove headlong for their seats; men found themselves harried on all sides, with no pause for respite, and harried again in turn. They did not understand; they knew only that fierce unrest possessed all the earth, manifesting itself in the terrible wandering of the nations, which was to culminate in a new world and a new order of things. Small wonder that bewildered folk, swept on and overwhelmed in the maelstrom of world-wide turbulence, unknowing what must happen next,

predicted and believed that with the year 999 the end of the world would surely come.

They had good reason for such belief. At Rome the fierce tribes from Northern Europe could no longer be held back. Goths, Vandals, Huns, each in their own good time had joined in the attack. Rome the Mighty, the Eternal, invincible as Fate, whose power no man believed could have an end, was brought to bay at last, impotent, drained by internal sores, goaded and tortured by foes without, with a horde of wolfish barbarians snarling and snapping at her throat. From one distant province after another her legions were called home. The fated twelve centuries of her power were ended; the direst tragedy of history had begun.

Britain, with all her fear and hatred of the heavy Roman hand, had yet been secure from outer harm while the strength of that hand was with her. For in the north were skulking bands of Picts and Scots, lawless and undisciplined, seized with the contagion of excitement which stirred their neighbors. In the south were Saxons, the terrible men of the Short Knives; about the coasts to east and south were bands of pirates, Jutes and Saxons both. Driven from their own lairs, they could but seek new resting-places; and Britain was the only spot where they might obtain a foothold. These rovers the Roman legions had held long years in check; yet it was told that soon the troops would be recalled to Rome's defence. None believed that Britain would be left wholly to herself; for Rome was too far away for her full peril to be brought home to those whose own affairs kept their hands well filled. But in the tenth year of the fifth century across the sea came letters from

Honorius the Emperor, urging the cities of Britain to provide for their own defence, since Rome could no longer send them aid. And for Britain this was the slow beginning of the end. There followed then invasion after invasion of barbarians, which the cities, forever quarrelling among themselves, were forced to unite in repulsing. The Saxons thus overcome, ended usually by settling in Roman cities under Roman government peaceably enough until the next attack by their countrymen, in which they invariably joined. By the year 420 Angles and Saxons had gradually established themselves on the eastern and southeastern coasts, while other allied tribes constantly harassed the western districts.

Since the second century Rome's army in Britain had dwindled to four legions. At Deva, in the west, was the Twentieth Legion, holding in check the fierce mountain tribes of the Silures, and, with the Second, farther south, at Isca Silurum, keeping at bay the pirates who at times sailed up the broad Sabrina on plunder bent. In the north, at Eboracum, was the famous Sixth, within quick reaching-distance of Valentia and Caledonia. At Ratæ was the Ninth, guarding the low country and the eastern fens. But after the Emperor's letter, the Ninth and the Twentieth sailed away, and the proconsul at Eboracum perforce sent part of his own troops to fill their places. Two years later, the Sixth was recalled. And then the consul abandoned Eboracum, that great city which since its foundation had been the seat of government for all the land, and with his forces moved farther south, leaving it deserted.

But not for long. For Caledonians and Saxons came down from the north and occupied it, and settled there

to stay. And after that, whenever Romans left the northern towns, seeking greater security in the southward provinces, the barbarians advanced and took possession, and thus gained the foothold for which they had been struggling ever since the Conquest. And so the coming of the end was hastened.

Those later days of the departure of the troops were stirring days. The island, governed by the lords of the cities, each in feudal independence, had shaken off the leading-strings of Rome. It was wealthy; as yet it was prosperous; the advance of the barbarians, though it might be sure, was slow. When Rome's troubles were past, she would send her troops again, and the invaders would be driven out for good and all. Yet there were many folk abroad in those days, asking anxious questions, filled with responsibility and care. And ever and again, along the great white roads, a cohort would go flashing past, lined up to full number, gallant in fighting trim, with standards flying, and eyes set always southward, toward the sea and Rome.

There were many other folk upon the busy highways, — an endless procession that went and came. Pack-horses, war chariots, slaves and soldiers, nobles, merchants, and artificers, men with goods to sell and men without, — a motley throng from many lands. Nicanor, shy and fierce-eyed and of shaggy hair, tramping steadily southward in the wake of the swift-footed soldiers, felt that the world was a very mighty place, and never had he dreamed of such great people. As he drew nearer Londinium, the traffic and the bustle increased. More troops kept coming up; and again others

passed them, going down. And now, among the low hills, he caught glimpses of fair and stately houses gleaming among wooded groves; and there were huts of plastered mud, straw-thatched, where dwelt gaunt, collared slaves.

On either side of the road were broad meadows where sheep were grazing; and ploughed fields where men and women stood yoked like cattle and strained to the cut of the ploughman's lash; and quarries where men toiled endlessly under heart-breaking loads, driven on by blows and curses. These were the things which Nicanor had known all his life, for his father worked, and his mother. But when he met a fat and perfumed man, riding upon a milk-white mule, with servants before and behind him, and beasts of burden bearing hampers, — then Nicanor could not understand. He bowed before the fat man deeply, thinking him the great Lord Governor himself; and men by the roadside laughed and mocked him. So that he fought them, and came out of his second conflict very valiantly, with a closed eye and a lip badly cut.

And so, in the fulness of time, he came to the last day of his journey.

It was a gray day, touched with the smoky breath of Autumn, with all the country veiled in softest haze. It was very early morning, and few people were upon the road, although since the first light of dawn men had been working in field and forest. From a farmhouse off the road came the crowing of a cock and the creak of a cumbrous handmill hidden in a thick copse near by. Nicanor, sitting by the roadside where he had slept, ate the food remaining overnight in his wallet, and rolled

his sheepskin cloak into a bundle for his shoulders. Behind him, from the road, came a man's voice, suddenly, singing a rollicking drinking-song. The singer brought up beside Nicanor, a black-haired man in a soiled leather jerkin and cap of shining brass, with a matted beard and narrow eyes, and a great leaf-shaped sword swinging at his thigh. This one hailed him heartily, in a loud voice.

"Good youth, canst tell me where I am?"

"Why, yes," said Nicanor, proud to display his knowledge of the locality. "This be the street a Saxon man at Ad Fines named to me Eormen —"

"Ad Fines? Thirty miles from Londinium? Now I could have sworn that yesternight I was in Tripontium, thrice thirty miles from there. I was there yesterday — or maybe that time a week ago. 'T is a small failing of mine to go where I do not mean to go, and know not how I get there, when the wine is in me. But this way will do, and now I am so far upon it, I may as well go farther."

He sat down beside Nicanor.

"Dost know of any lord would have a fine stout serving-man?" he said with a wheedle. "One who can carve, be it swine or human, skilled with sword or sling, who can drive a chariot, pair or single-span?"

"Not I," Nicanor answered. "I be a stranger in these parts."

"Bound for Londinium?" asked the black-haired man.

"Nay, for the Christian church of Saint Peter's, on Thorney which is called the Isle of Brambles," said Nicanor, without guile.

"Why, then, I 'll go there too," the stranger said

amiably. "For I am most devilishly lost, driven from town and camp, the first time sober in a week; and money I must gain, or starve. Eh, Bacchus! the women — the women!" He sighed, shaking his black head dolefully.

"What concern had they with it?" Nicanor wished to know. "Did they turn thee out from camp and town?"

"Ay, boy, turned me out and turned me inside out," said the black-haired man, and grinned. "Never a little copper ass have I left upon me. See, now, our paths lie in the same direction, since my path is any path. Shall we go together? For I swear I'll not get lost again. Behold me, Valerius, sometime of the Ninth Legion at Ratæ, now, by the grace of God, of no legion at all. I have my tablet of discharge from service; a follower of fortune you see me, with my sword as long as the purse of him who hires it."

Nicanor, half shy, half pleased with his new acquaintance, told in turn his name and station.

"Thou and I will be good friends," the soldier said. "I love a lad of spirit, such as thou. I'll fight for thee and thou shalt steal for me. 'T is a fair division of labor. Hear you how my tongue waggeth? For a week it hath been sleeping off the wine, and now that it be sober again, it runneth by itself. Come, friend, art ready?"

On the way Valerius talked irrepressibly, with many strange oaths and ejaculations, mixing his religions impartially. He told weird tales of life in camps and teeming cities, so that Nicanor's blood tingled, and he longed to go also and do these things of which he

heard. The tales of Valerius did not always hang together, but Nicanor cared not at all for that. By and by Valerius took to asking questions, his tongue in his cheek at some of Nicanor's replies. In half an hour he had learned the boy's life, deeds, and ambitions, and had extracted a promise that Nicanor would get the worthy Tobias to provide him also with employment, preferably around the church, where would be fat pickings and little work. At noon they ate by the roadside with two kindly disposed merchants, and later continued on their way, meeting other folk, with whom Valerius passed the time of day.

So, toward sunset, they came with many others ahorse and afoot, to Thorney, the Isle of Brambles, at the foot of the road. And here Nicanor thought he had never seen anything so wonderful, and stood staring wide-eyed, while Valerius hummed his drinking-song and chewed a piece of metyl leaf, which turned his lips and teeth quite red.

For here the country broadened out into a great marsh, vast and spreading widely over the land, dotted with eyots, where birds flew low among the sedge. Away to west and east were low grim hills, with a sense of unending space and loneliness upon them. And at the foot of the street was the ford, crowded here with men, — soldiers and serfs and freedmen, — with horses and mules and heavy carts. Through the ford they all went splashing; and it was wide and shallow, marked out by stakes and with stepping-stones showing above the water. And beyond the ford, under the gray skies, was Thorney, the Bramble Isle, alive with a swarming throng of people. On the right of the island was Saint

Peter's church, upon the spot where next Saint Peter's Abbey, and centuries later the great Westminster, would stand. It rose silent in a smother of confusion and a babel of noise of men shouting, and horses neighing, and the songs of boatmen on the Tamesis which bounded the southern end of the island. There was a temple of Apollo close beside it, for old gods and new dwelt side by side. To the ancient faith of their pagan fathers the aristocracy of Britain still held true; the new God was for slaves and humble folk, who had derived no benefits from the old creeds and were willing to try any which promised help. And old Rome had seen the rise and fall of many gods, for she was aged and very wise. Jupiter, best and greatest, Isis, Mithras, Astarte, Serapis — what was one more or less in her pantheon?

Around the church was a formless huddle of houses, thinning out and straggling at the water's edge; and fires were blazing here and there, and men were hurrying to set all in order for the night. For Thorney was a halting place where travellers from north and south and east and west rested a space and went their way, — a noisy, crowded place, where centred traffic for all Britain passing to and from Londinium, the great port, and the greater inland cities.

All of this Nicanor took in with delighted eyes. He ran down to the ford, dodging between pack-mules and jolting two-wheeled carts, and slipping eel-like past other pedestrians, forgetting Valerius, who hurried after. He strode from stone to stone, splashed by straining horses that tugged beside him, and sprang to shore upon the island. So he won to his journey's end.

"Now to find that good man Tobias," quoth Valerius,

and shook his wet feet daintily, as a cat that has stepped by accident in a puddle. "He will give thee food and lodging, which thou wilt share with me — so? Knowest thou his house? Jesus, Lord! Did ever man see the like of the nest of houses? Hey, friend!" He laid a hand on the shoulder of one passing. "Canst tell us where dwells the worthy Tobias, worker in ivory to the Christian Church?"

"Nay, not I," the man said, and hurried on. Over his shoulder he called back: "Ask the good priest yonder."

Valerius doffed his brazen cap to this holy man. He, in frock of sober gray, with head shaven to the line of the ears, and worn, pale face, walked toward the church, his beads swinging by one finger. At Valerius's question he looked up.

"The house next the open space on the right," he answered; raised two fingers in benediction upon them, and went his way. Valerius and Nicanor betook themselves to the house appointed.

It was then that Nicanor began to realize that he wished himself alone. Valerius hung to his arm affectionately, and Nicanor was too shy to shake him off. He did not know what to do; wherefore he did nothing. The house next the open space was low, of stone and timber. It was evident that Tobias was well-to-do. Valerius pounded upon the door; the heavy shutter of a window swung open, and a man's head peered out. It was a pink head, very bald, with flabby cheeks, a full-moon face, and pursed lips, and the beaked Hebraic nose of his father's race.

"Who comes?" the man asked, and stared at them.

Nicanor said:

"Art thou Tobias, the ivory carver?" and the pink head nodded.

Then Nicanor said:

"From Rathumus and Susanna his wife I come, and I am Nicanor, their son, and would be prentice to thee."

"And Valerius, thy friend," whispered Valerius, plucking at his sleeve.

"And Valerius, my friend," said Nicanor, obediently.

"Why, holy saints!" Tobias said. "From Susanna — and would be prentice to me! Hold a minute till I let thee in."

His pink head disappeared and the shutter slammed. Soon the door was opened, and Tobias welcomed them to his house. And a very good house it was, for Tobias was wealthy. He called his slave, and she brought food and wine, and they sat at the trestled board on cross-legged stools and ate until they could eat no more. Then Tobias asked questions, and Nicanor told of his home and of his parents and of his mother's words, while Valerius, full-fed, dozed with his head on the table. And as Nicanor talked, Tobias watched him, for to save his life the boy could not open his mouth without a tale coming out of it; and when he had ended Tobias rose and kissed him on both cheeks, and said:

"Thou 'lt stay with me, boy, and learn all that I can teach thee, until thou 'rt master-workman. And thou shalt live with me, and be my son, for sake of her who is thy mother — and it is not my fault that thou art not my son in very truth. Marry, but thou hast a silver tongue in that shock head of thine. Now come to bed; thy friend here is snoring like an ox. And in the

morning we 'll begin work, and one of my lads shall tell thee what to do."

So they roused up Valerius and took him off to a room with one window and a bed. And here Valerius, slipping out of his baldric, pulled the blanket from the bed, flung himself, dressed as he was, upon the floor, and was instantly as one dead.

IV

BUT Nicanor went to the window and opened the wooden shutter and leaned out. He heard the roar of the many camps, blending into one vast undercurrent of sound; he caught the red gleam of fires half hidden behind intervening houses; now and then a bellowed chorus reached him. Also there were sweet tinkling sounds, of a kind which he had never heard before, which thrilled him strangely. Sudden desire took him to be out in the midst of this new stirring life; to see the crowded places, the mingling of many men. Preparations for the night were going on, for it was dark by now, with high twinkling stars. He could see, by leaning far out, the moving glare of torches held high as belated wayfarers crossed the ford, the reflection of the lights dancing on the shallow waters. The fascination of it, this his first sight of Life, gripped him, not to be denied. He sprang to the ledge of the window, writhed himself through, and dropped to the ground outside.

Then, at once, he was in a new world, — a world of flickering flames and black dancing shadows, and strange sights and sounds, and restless figures passing always

to and fro. And, quite dazed, he stumbled against one, not a rod from the house, who laughed, with a laughter which made him think of the tinkling music he had heard, and beckoned him, drawing him in the darkness. But Nicanor, thrilling through all the awakening soul and body of him, turned and ran, shy suddenly, but at what he did not know.

So he came to a fire burning in a ring of stones; and around the fire men were sitting, eating and drinking, and the light played on their faces. With them were women, at whom Nicanor stared agape. For they were very fair to look on, with jewel-bound hair and slumberous eyes, lithe as snakes, with bare shoulders and dress of strange clinging stuffs. These were dancing girls, being taken to the great inland cities for sale or hire. And near by, huddled close for warmth, were slaves, — men, women, and children, chained in long strings, on the way to be sold in Gaul. Here were fishermen, also, and boatmen, gathered by themselves, a noisy crew, with loud jokes which Nicanor heard and did not understand. All about him was a babel of voices and laughter, boisterous and profane; now and then an altercation, short and violent. It went to Nicanor's head like wine. Never had he known anything like it; life like this had passed his bleak northern home entirely by. He drew nearer the groups around the fire, drinking it all in greedily, — new sights, new sounds, new impressions. His face was flushed with excitement, his breath came short; so much he found to interest him that he stared bewildered, uncertain what to look at first. The smell of cooking food was in the air, mingled with the aromatic pungency of many fires of wood. Horn cups clashed; at

intervals hoarse laughter drowned the shouts of teamsters and the creak and strain of wheels.

And suddenly, under the intoxication of it all, Nicanor found himself speaking in a new, fierce mood of exultation. What he was going to say he did not know; but his voice fell into the old measured chant, regular as the tramp of marching feet, which carried through all the tumult of sound around him. His heart beat hard, his hands clenched, but he flung back his head with eyes which glittered in the firelight. Those nearest looked on him in amazement, ready to scorn. Then they held silent, and listened. Others drew closer, to see what might be going on. More came, and more. Women left men's knees and joined the little crowd, smiling, then with parted lips of wonder. Nicanor neither saw nor heard them. For the first time in all his life he was carried beyond himself; in a physical ecstasy he spoke out that which clamored at his lips, caring nothing for his audience, unconscious of them utterly. And because that is the one thing which will grip men's minds and compel them, he held them spellbound, in spite of themselves, — until, abruptly, in a flash, he became conscious of himself, seeing himself, hearing himself. That moment he lost his hold of them. And he knew it, and stopped short. And for an instant there was silence.

Then a woman drew a long breath which was like a sigh, and a man muttered something into his beard. The spell snapped; and like a flood let loose their talk leaped at him. They shouted, "More!" They would know who he was, and whence he came, and he must finish the tale for them. But Nicanor shook his head, dumbly, with a new and strange emotion surging through him.

He was frightened at himself, at his feeling, at what he had done. And back of his fear lay something deeper, something which he could not name, — half exultation, half truest awe, as though he stood in a presence mightier than he and knew himself for but the tool with which the work was wrought.

There came a woman, very wonderful, and hot as flame, and put into his hand a broad piece of silver, looking into his eyes. A man with a broken nose thrust a copper coin into his palm; others followed. For a moment he stood staring at the fire-lit faces around him like one foolish or in a trance, with his own face quite white. That he might receive money for his soul had never entered his head. Then he broke away from them all and ran — ran as though for his life — back to the house of Tobias, and clambered through the low window and flung himself upon the bed, laughing and sobbing and shaking, and clutching his coins in sweating hands.

For he had entered into his heritage at last, and the Future had become the Present.

V

THE working-place of Master Tobias was a small room half underground, with three windows on a level with the street. Long boards on trestles were ranged upon three sides, leaving the centre free; these were much chipped and scarred, and black with oil and dirt. On these tables were small list-wheels for polishing, formed of circular thicknesses of woollen stuff clamped tightly between two wooden disks of smaller diameter which left a pliant edge of wool projecting, held firmly in wooden frames and turned by hand. There were trays of tools for carving and graving and scraping, and boxes of fine sand and of glass-parchment. In a corner was a grindstone; and the unclean floor was littered with sawdust and scrapings of bone. Here half a dozen men were working, in oil-stained aprons of leather. The wheels hummed continuously, with a steady droning; at intervals the great saw shrieked and grated; from the storeroom a boy brought long tusks ready for the first cutting.

Men have worked in ivory before ever history began, and of all known arts it is the most ancient and one of the most beautiful. And no two master-workmen have

gone about it after precisely the same manner, but each has followed his own method of treating the bone, of cutting, which is a delicate business, of smoothing, and of polishing. At different ages widely differing means were employed to bring about the same effect. There were many curious things to be learned in the way of what and what not to do, — how to treat bone with boiling vinegar, and secret processes of rolling out ivory and joining it invisibly, for the making of larger pieces than could possibly be cut from any one tusk. Lost secrets, these, to us; and being lost, by many doubted as having ever been. These things Master Tobias had learned, many years before, from a workman of Byzantium, where the work was already famous, and far and away ahead of all. This man, dying, had left Master Tobias all he knew, and tools such as never otherwise could he have obtained. So that the fame of Master Tobias went abroad through the province; and he did much work in the way of tablets, diptychs, caskets, figures of gods and goddesses and of Christian saints. Many a carven comb and jewel-box found its way to some haughty Roman beauty's dressing-table, the work of Master Tobias's own fat hands. He found good markets for his wares, since Roman love of bijouterie was strong, and he had few competitors. It was not until the establishment of Saxon dominion that the art obtained a permanent foothold in Britain; and then it went back to its first crude beginnings, as did nearly all other things at that second conquest.

So behold Nicanor, bare-armed and in leathern apron, carrying tusks to and fro, cleaning them after their arrival from the merchants' hands, and giving them out

to the workmen as required. Thus he came to learn the various shades of coloring; how to tell when bone was healthy and might be expected to take the cutting well, or when it would be apt to crack and split under the saw. Having come to know the differences in degree, he was put to checking off the lots as they arrived, according to kind and grade. Mammoth tusks of elephants, sometimes ten feet in length, weighing close on a hundred pounds, solid to within six inches of the tip; teeth and tusks of the wild boar, walrus-bone and whalebone, used for coarser work and filling, — all these he must tell apart at a glance. For to the untrained, bone is bone.

This was light work, and left him time to watch what others did; whereby, quite unconsciously, he absorbed much useful knowledge, which was as Master Tobias intended. Then, being well acquainted with color and texture and grain, he was put to help with the big saw, coarse-toothed, worked by two men, and had to learn to cut his lengths to a fraction of an inch as required, with the least possible waste. This took him some time, for a bone is full of twists and turns which render it liable to be cut to pieces, so that much care is needful. So he went up, step by step, knowing well each detail before he undertook the next, until at last he began to work under Master Tobias's own eye. And then, for the first time, having acquired an insight into the art, was he able to appreciate the skill of the master-workman. And this is the way of all art from the beginning, and as it must be to the end, since only he who knows may understand.

In long course of time, when many months had gone,

came the day when he brought forth his own first work, a crucifix, the fruit of his own labors, touched by no other hands from first to last. Himself he selected the tusk, flawless, finely grained; cut it to the block, shaped it, the upright of the cross, the arms, the rough outline of the Christ upon it. Then, bit by bit, cutting, cutting, cutting, the figure grew, with rounding outlines, and coherent features. The straining ribs, — for this effect he cut against the grain, in the way that Master Tobias had taught him, — the pierced hands and feet, the draped cloth about the loins; slowly it formed under his eager fingers. He smoothed it with glass-parchment, polished it on the list-wheel; in the end painted it, with red lips and crimson drops of blood and draping of richest purple. And he chose that Christian symbol solely because, out of all the subjects offered by Master Tobias, it presented fewest difficulties in the matter of draperies — greatest stumbling block to all novices. So it was finished, and became the pride of his life, — but not for what it was; only for that it was the work of his own hands. Had it been an offering to Apollo he would have loved it just as well. And when he had finished it, Master Tobias kissed him upon either cheek, even as he had done once before, and declared that he could die happy, for he should have a successor to keep his art alive.

But all this took much time; and meanwhile Nicanor was learning many things besides the art of carving.

When he was in the humor for it, Nicanor could work very well indeed, as he had shown. But more often than not he was sadly out of humor; and liked nothing so much as to slip away from the hum and drone of the

wheels and the smell of bone and oil, and wander out of the quiet church precinct down to the busy life at the fords. Here was unending amusement; all day long he would watch the going and the coming, listen to the uproar of traffic, silent himself or mingling with the crowds.

Day after day narrow barges went up the Tamesis with the tide from the port of Londinium, deep-laden with wines and spices, silks, glass, candles, and rich stuffs from foreign lands; with lamps and statuary and paintings for the great Roman houses; with fruits and grain, vegetables, meats and poultry. And at the ebb came the barges down again, this time with wool and pelts, smelling villanously and tainting all the air as they went by. Here also was the river-ford, passable at low tide, marked out by stakes, and leading from the southern side of Thorney, opposite the marsh-ford, over to the mainland, where again the road began and stretched away to Londinium. Here the fisher-folk cast their nets for salmon in their season, for other fish in plenty the year round, shouting across to the bargemen passing up or down. These, besides the few priests and servants of Saint Peter's church, and the keepers of the inns, were the only ones who lived upon the Bramble Isle. All others came and went, and never stayed save for a night.

Day after day came craftsmen, traders of all kinds, merchants with bundles of hides on pack-horses to be shipped at Dubræ; mines, actors, musicians, jugglers. Crested-helmeted cohorts, with glancing shields and bristling spears, splashed through the fords on their way south, stern dark-faced men from many nations. Long

strings of slaves, who then as later formed so large a part of Britain's export trade, were marched with clanking chains along the highways. Always was color, life, movement, the clamor of voices, the rumble of wheels; a constant stir, ceaseless, pulsing, feverish.

It was small wonder, then, that Nicanor, alive in every fibre of his eager being, thirsting for adventure, should escape from the workshop's confinement as often as might be, to watch and wonder at the passing show. Also it was small wonder that Master Tobias did not like such rovings of his pupil, and openly disapproved. With reason he argued that if a man would make his work worth while he must stick to his bench and tools. But Nicanor, at such times, cared little whether or not he made that work worth while. At his bench he was restless, fretting to be gone. Only outside, amid hurrying men and the confusion of arrival and departure, was he at peace, entirely happy and content. And this was but natural, since young dogs strain always at the leash, and as his fate had written. But this, Master Tobias, bound heart and soul to his beloved task, could not understand.

Being both fiery, they clashed often, when dire confusion followed. Upon these occasions, Master Tobias, purple with wrath, brandished his burin and raved. Nicanor was an ingrate; Nicanor was a fool and a good-for-naught, who deserved everlasting punishment and would surely get it. And Nicanor, white-hot within and silent, — two years before he would have screamed with rage like any other infuriate young wild thing, — laid aside his tools and left the work-room, his head in air, his jaws set like steel to a thin smile, his wrath blazing

all the fiercer for being dumb. Not until he found himself with a circle of gaping faces around him, hanging on his words, would his anger cool and his world right itself to normal. Then, his steam worked off, himself peaceful and serene, he would return to the house for supper, meet Master Tobias's menacing growls with demure politeness, and forthwith charm him into abject surrender with diabolical art. So peace would be restored, with the combatants firmer friends than ever — until the spirit within him moved Nicanor once more. And yet, — for this is as it always happens, — each fresh quarrel was fiercer than the one before.

It was after one of these passages-at-arms that Nicanor, losing his temper completely, spoke to Master Tobias as he had never dared speak before. And then, foolishly bound to keep the last word, strode off in a fume, out of the church grounds, through the huddle of houses and crowd of passing folk, whose clamor put him yet more out of sorts, and down to the river-ford. Here he paused, kicking up the earth with the toe of his laced leather shoe, in a very evil temper, wanting only something to vent his spleen upon. And standing thus, he heard all at once an outcry behind him, and wheeled, and saw a thing which made him forget his grievance and consider that after all he was more lucky in his lot than some.

At first he saw only a crowd of men and boys, who jeered and hooted. This was a sight not new; but in their midst he caught a glimpse of a crested helmet and the black cloak of a slave-driver. And then the crowd parted, and Nicanor saw a girl, a lean wisp of a thing, with burning eyes and a gray face framed in straight

black hair, with chained wrists and a ragged frock which slipped aside to show a long red welt across her brown shoulders. The slave-driver held the end of the chain, his heavy whip tucked beneath one arm, — a squat man with a black and brutal face and small hard eyes. He was appraising the girl's good points glibly, as though of a mare to be sold, — her working strength, present perfections, future possibilities. The soldier, wax tablets and stylus in hand, his back half turned to Nicanor, made notes of what he said, at intervals throwing in a comment or a question.

"From the north, you say?"

"Ay, lord, born of a Roman soldier and a British wench. A good investment, noble sir, and the price but small, — only five-and-fifty sestertii, — and that because I give thanks to be rid of her."

"Hath she spirit, fire? I want not a puny, slinking chit."

"Spirit — fire!" the man repeated with a curse. "If that be what you wish, lord, it is here in very flesh. This young she-devil hath given me as much trouble as three men."

The soldier fumbled for his pouch and counted money into the dealer's hand. The latter counted it again, spat upon it for luck, made his mark in the Roman's book, and unchained the girl's wrists.

The Roman laid a hand on the shoulder of his bargain.

"Come, pretty one!" said he, and turned, so that for the first time his face was to be seen. "Thou 'lt get no more blows nor curses, if so be thou 'lt do thy duty well."

Leering, he drew her forward. Nicanor cast a glance upon him, and started, and hailed him. For the Roman

was Valerius, the errant one; and what he wanted with a slave girl who had no beauty, and where he got her price, was more than Nicanor could tell.

Valerius, still with a hand on the girl's shoulder, grinned at him, and said:

"Why, now, friend, 't is a very good day that brings thee to my sight. Not since I was repairer of sandals to the good fathers — thanks to thee — have I seen thee, though I hunted the place over for thee, and mourned right tenderly when I found thee not. And that was near a year ago."

And always, though his speech was pleasant, as he spoke he moved away, sidling, with a certain stealthiness, a glinting of his narrow eyes from side to side. Nicanor became interested, and followed a pace. The girl stared at him with desperate dumb eyes.

"Thou hast made a good purchase," he said carelessly, and thought that for an instant the other showed his teeth.

"Not for myself!" Valerius said humbly. Whether it suited him, for motives of his own, to play the worthy poor man, Nicanor could not tell. "I but act on behalf of my lord Eudemius, of the great white villa off the Noviomagus road, this side of Londinium — hey, now! by all the furies, what is this?"

For the gray-faced girl, with hunted eyes, flung herself suddenly from his hand, crying in a hoarse croak of a voice:

"Not for him! Not for the lord Eudemius, the Torturer! I am not bought for him!"

Again Nicanor found himself staring, for there was fear and anguish in her voice such as he had never heard

in human tones. And as they looked at her in amazement, she rocked from side to side, sobbing without tears, and whispering keenly:

"Not for him! Ah, dear Christ in heaven! not for him!"

"And why not?" Valerius demanded. "What hast thou against him that his name sends thee squealing —"

"What against him?" the girl said fiercely. "He tortures — he mutilates — he strips flesh from living bones, and laughs! Let a slave raise an eyelid in his presence, and he were better dead. Ay, I know — I know! I will not go to him! I will drown — choke — hang myself first!"

She glared around her as though to seek deliverance where none was. Valerius shook her roughly by the arm.

"Thou 'lt come with me and hush thy whining!"

They had reached a lane between the houses, unpaved, trampled hard and uneven by many feet. This lane was known then as the Street of the Black Dog; and it ended abruptly at the low stone wall which here marked the boundary of Saint Peter's land. By the wall, at the head of the street, was one of the rude stone crosses which were raised at intervals around the walls and at every gate therein. This was forty or fifty yards ahead of them as they stood. As Valerius touched the girl she sprang away from him and fled forward up the street, with head thrown back and torn rags fluttering and her black hair streaming behind her in a cloud. Valerius shouted and plunged after her, a hand outstretched with clutching fingers. And after them went Nicanor, his eyes alight with the lust of the chase, the fierce joy of the hunting, old as mankind itself. As

Valerius snatched at a rag on the girl's shoulder, he gave a sharp yelp of triumph, as a hound yells when its leash-mate has nipped the fox. But the rag tore away as the girl struggled free. She reached the head of the street, a flying figure of terror, with the black-browed Roman at her heels and Nicanor racing alongside; staggered, recovered, stumbled again even as he touched her, and fell forward at the foot of the stone cross, with a sob like that of a horse ridden to the death, clasping the column with both hands and crying:

"I claim sanctuary! I claim sanctuary!"

Then her head fell forward on her out-flung arms, and she lay with thin shoulders heaving to her fighting breath, and her face hidden in her tangled mane. Valerius stopped, almost in his stride, all but overrunning her, so close upon her had he been. He shook his balled fist and cursed her, glaring down upon her, not daring to touch so much as a strand of hair. For she was in the shelter of holy Church; and few men were bold enough to violate that terrible, wonderful Law of Sanctuary which even then was beginning to be dreaded and respected, and which high and low might claim alike. So that Valerius walked in half-circles about her, like a baffled beast which sees its prey torn from its very jaws; and she lay and shuddered, and Nicanor stood watching with avid eyes. For as yet he was only a very primitive young animal, with the instinct of his kind to join with the hunter against the hunted. People began to gather, quickly, clamoring with question and theory; and upon these Valerius scowled, biting his nails in fury. The girl raised herself, crouching close beneath the cross, and looked around her like a trapped thing, crying:

"A priest! Is there no Christian priest here who will tell this man that I be safe from him in sanctuary?"

Valerius pulled Nicanor to him.

"Go thou and find one," he said harshly; "for while she sticketh to this cross I dare not lay finger upon her lest I be torn limb from limb by fools. He can but give her up; for she is bought and paid for, and it is not hers to say whether she finds her master to her liking. And quick with thee, that I may get her where she cannot fly again."

So Nicanor went swiftly through the nearest gate into the yard of the church, and looked about him for a priest And it seemed to him that the more hasty grew his search, the less was it rewarded, for he was in a desperate hurry to get back and see what followed. Presently, ahead of him, he saw a priest, whom he knew as Father Ambrose, and he ran to him, shouting:

"Holy Father, a slave hath claimed sanctuary at the cross by the Street of the Black Dog, and asketh for a priest to confirm her right."

The good Father kilted up his gown, and together they ran through the nearest byway to that street. And then, quite suddenly, as they reached the end of it, Nicanor felt with a shock that he must have mistaken the place. For although the cross was there, and the wall, and the street was the Street of the Black Dog, yet there was no sign of the girl, nor of Valerius, nor of any of those who had gathered to look on. So that Nicanor turned to Father Ambrose with a face of pure fright, and stammered:

"But I left them here, upon this spot! Or else I am sure bewitched!"

He looked to right and left and back to Father Ambrose. Father Ambrose shook his head and said passively:

"It may be that they have arranged the matter among themselves. Let us return."

He walked off, placid and unstirred; and Nicanor touched the cross to make sure that it was real and no delusion, and looked into the sky and around upon the clustered houses, and spoke no word at all. But he knew quite surely that the matter had not been arranged.

THE GARDEN OF DREAMS

BOOK II

Book II

THE GARDEN OF DREAMS

I

THE years went on, — misty Springs, golden Summers, flaming Autumns, Winters stark and chill, leaving each its tale on the unrolling scroll of time. For in those years the consul departed from Britain with his forces, and the cities ruled themselves, each in a state of feudal independence, now warring amongst themselves, now making common cause against their common foes.

Were history to write itself more often with a view to cumulative dramatic effect, there would be small need for the romance of imagination. One would have history a tale, of swift climax and excitement, when it is in fact a scattered medley — a battle here, a bit of statecraft there; here a burning Rome, yonder a new God; and between these the commonplace round of human life and toil and death, the inevitable dead level of the tale. It is because of the long lapses between cause and effect, the revolutions slow and of secret tardy growth instead of by fire and sword, that men turn to Imagina-

tion to bridge the gap. Events, grand and stirring, woven, one believes, into the very fabric of history, are proved to be the pleasant tale of some ancient ardent romancer, with an eye for dramatic effect. And often it is the bit choicest and most intimate of detail, binding the chronicle into a dramatic whole, which the iron pick of Research digs from the heap of bones, and wise men say: "That brilliant hero never lived; this great battle was but a skirmish; some old monk wrote that — it never happened." Many a glowing jewel, cherished tenderly and shining bravely through the dust of ages, has turned, in the white light of knowledge, to worthless glass. So do the old gods perish.

Thus came the chronicle of Saxon conquest down to us, — a brave and lusty tale, scarred with battles, written in blood, picturing a horde of savage foemen that swarmed over the Walls and swept through a blood-drenched land. In fact and deed, it was a conquest of absorption rather than extermination, dramatic only in its vast significance; a gradual amalgamation of two forces, in which the stronger, cleaner Norse blood triumphed over worn-out and depleted Roman stock. As weeds, rank and sturdy, overrun a garden, choking out other plants, so in Britain, Saxon life overgrew Roman life, inch by inch, almost imperceptibly. The conquest was by no means bloodless. Towns were sacked and men were slain; here was an explosion, there an outbreak of lawlessness; but for the most part the change was wrought with deadly slowness and a sureness which nothing could check.

In these years Nicanor grew tall and strong and long of limb, and his voice ceased to play him false with

strange pipings which had filled him with wrath and dire dismay. He learned to use eyes and ears as well as tongue; he worshipped at the altars of strange gods, and laughed at them. He lived from day to day as the birds live, picking up a crumb here and yonder. In the workshop he spent as little time as might be, restless, not content with what he had, ever eager for that which he had not, devoured by the curiosity which would lay hands on the strange throbbing thing called Life, and probe its inmost hidden meaning.

And as time went on, the unrest deepened which possessed him. He was unhappy, and he could not tell why. He wanted something, and he knew not what. His shyness developed into fierce aggressiveness, unreasonable, alarming. He prowled continually among the camps, sullen and quarrelsome, vaguely miserable, and blaming his misery upon all the world. He took to spending much time, with small profit to himself, among the chained gangs of slaves, where were cruel sounds and crueller sights. At the hiss and cut of the lash on bared backs and thighs he thrilled with savage exultation; he took morbid delight in the sight of pain inflicted; and this he could not at all understand. At this season his tales were all of war and blood and violence, of treachery and despair. When night came he slept fitfully or not at all, with uneasy half-formed dreams. And in these dreams he was always searching for a thing which had no name, starting over the river-ford upon the high southern bank, ending nowhere under gray skies and desolation. He neglected his carving, waged bloody battles with his fellow workmen, bullied Master Tobias like any slave-driver. Lonely and shy and sullen, he

fought through his crisis by himself, not knowing that it was a crisis, nor why it had come upon him.

No one took the trouble to help him; he would not have thanked them if they had. Outwardly he was taller, more gaunt, with a certain rough virility which impressed. Men knew that he was savage, and baited him even while they feared him; himself only knew that he was miserable, — more miserable, because he could not understand why he should be so at all. He lived the wild life of the camps, drinking, brawling, making fierce love with a vague notion that this was what he wanted, ever finding the fruit of desire change to ashes in his mouth. Always the power within him grew; and always he despised those upon whom he wrought his magic. For it was nothing to master these, to do with them as he willed; all his art was lost upon them since they could not understand.

He was then at work with Master Tobias upon a book-cover for the gospels, which was for Saint Peter's, and very much interested he was and pleased with his share in it. In the morning he went to work right willingly, with no thought other than to do as best he might with all his skill. So he got his tools, and the oil and glass-paper for the first polishing, and, Master Tobias not having yet appeared, started to go on himself with the bit of scroll he had begun the day before. Seeing it with fresh eyes after a lapse of hours, it struck him that a change might be made in one place with much advantage from the design which they had planned. So he made the change, and was still more pleased. When Master Tobias entered, Nicanor pointed to what he had done, and said:

"Is not this a better way, good sir? That corner needs balancing, and it is in my mind that the design should work up this way—" he illustrated with his burin—"and so bring into harmony—"

And then it was that the unexpected happened. For Master Tobias rose from his stool and stood over him, and said:

"Hast thou changed the design I made?"

Nicanor replied that he had, and wished to show the advantage of his new idea. But Master Tobias struck his hand aside, and shrill with rage, exclaimed:

"Thou good-for-nothing clod! Thou hast spoiled the work with thy clumsy handling! Why canst not leave alone what thou dost not understand? Who gave permission to change? Body of me! Must I stand over thee every hour in the day and switch thy hands for disobedience?"

"But it is not spoiled!" Nicanor protested with indignation.

Master Tobias stormed.

"I say it is! I say it is, and must be smoothed out and changed. And thou 'lt stay within and do it, until all is as it was before. I 'll show thee my designs are not to be altered thus unwarrantably!"

And herein he made a mistake. For when he said "Thou shalt!" Nicanor's impulse was "I will not!" and as yet he acted upon impulse. Master Tobias could have flogged him if he wished; Nicanor cared not a rap for flogging. He rose in open rebellion and pushed away his stool.

"Not I!" he said. "The design is false, and I will not put into my work what is not as it should be!"

He turned and marched out of the room — leaving Master Tobias dumb with astonishment and rage — surly and savage and very bitter, with his hand against every man because he thought that every man's hand was against him.

And then, quite suddenly, there swept over him the fierce, insistent longing for change which wrestles with every man at some time or other in his life; the hot desire to fling himself out of the rut into which that life inevitably must settle, to encounter anything, good or bad, so long as it brought a change. And because he was still too young to see that this is the very one thing which may not be; the one thing of which Fate says: "Come and go, and plan as ye will, but remember that I hold the leading-strings; for my name men call Circumstance, and my law is that man shall do not what he will, but what he must," — because as yet he could not see this, he left Thorney that day for Londinium, saying no word of his grievance to any man, with his bundle tied to a stick upon his shoulder.

It was on the road to Londinium that he overtook one journeying in the same direction, who kept pace with him persistently, let him go fast or slow. This was a venerable man, with a long beard of white, and wise, all-seeing eyes that smiled and smiled beneath the penthouse of his brows. Nicanor came to hate him vindictively, with no reason at all, as he hated all the world just then.

Nicanor stopped at evening by the roadside, and sat down to eat the food he had brought with him. And this ancient man stopped also, and sat upon a stone near by, and watched him. Nicanor, with meat and black bread in his hands, glanced up, ready to scowl, and met

the old man's eyes, smiling at him. It was so long since any man had done other than revile him — since one's own mood will reflect itself like an image in clear water upon the minds of those around one — that Nicanor was surprised into smiling back, uncertainly, it is true, but still smiling. Then it was as though a bit of that outer crust of moroseness melted, and left something of his old boyish shyness in its place. Without stopping in the least to think why he did it, he broke the bread and meat into two portions, and held out one, in silence, awkwardly, as a child who does not know whether his gift will be accepted or cast upon the ground.

Now if that old man, perhaps not understanding, had not taken what he offered, turning from him then, it must surely have been that Nicanor would have shrugged his shoulders, and flung the food upon the road, and shut up once more within his shell of surliness, with his opinion of mankind fully justified in his own mind. But whether he wanted it or not, the old man took his gift, with eyes grave yet always smiling upon his lowering, half-shamed face, and said in a voice like a deep-toned bell, so clear was it and vibrant:

"I thank thee, my son."

He ate the food, slowly; and Nicanor watched him slyly, as he ate his own supper, fancying himself vastly indifferent to all ancient smiling strangers. But deep down in his rough shy heart he was pleased for that he had succeeded in not turning another soul away from him — so small a thing has power to change the balance sometimes; and when the old man spoke he did not wish to repulse him, as often. The stranger said, quite as though he had a right to know:

"Son, art sure that it will be well for thee to go to Londinium? Is what thou seekest there?"

Nicanor answered with immense surprise:

"I seek nothing."

"So?" the old man said, and smiled. "Now I thought that surely thou wert seeking something, and very near to black despair because thou hadst not found it."

And at once, like an echo from another world, there came to Nicanor the memory of a time when he had wandered seeking for something which he could not name, upon the downs, under gray skies and desolation. And he did not know if this had really happened or had been but a dream. But he began to think the old man very strange and rather to be feared. He said:

"Old man, how may you tell that I seek for what I cannot find; and why would it be not well for me in Londinium?"

The old man's face changed then, so that for an instant Nicanor was frightened. For into it there came a high far look of utter peace, such as the face of a holy saint who has suffered all might wear, if he awakened. And while Nicanor stared, not knowing what to think about it, the old man said gently:

"Son, I may tell by right of having known myself what thou art knowing now. For the faces of men are as an open scroll to those who have learned to read what is writ therein, and thy story is upon thee very clear. Thou art in a world of thine own creation, but this world of men hath also claims upon thee, which thou canst not ignore. And I say to thee, go again to that place which thou hast left, for to find what thou art seeking, one need not go afield. And when thou hast found that

thing, which is in this world of men, seek thou sanctuary, which is holy love."

Nicanor said: "I do not understand! What hath love to do with it?" — and told of the love that he had seen, which was all he knew. The old man listened, with unchanging eyes upon him, and said:

"Now truly I see thou dost not understand. This be not love, but a blast of furnace heat which scorcheth. But some time thou wilt come to understand the meaning of my words, and then shalt thou find sanctuary and peace. Ay, peace — that is what men cry for in the dark days that are passing; and they shall seek refuge and find none, and the bitterness of death shall be upon them. For it shall be said even as by the prophet of Babylon, mother of old evil — 'Rome the Mighty is fallen — is fallen!'"

He swayed gently as he sat, with hands uplifted and eyes no longer smiling; and to Nicanor's eyes his long white beard and hair were as a mist of silver around his head.

"Thou also shalt pass through the Valley, for the Black Dog of trouble is upon thee; and thou shalt work out thine own unhappiness and thine own salvation. For thy way is the way of loneliness, and of misunderstanding, and of the Cross. And this is as it must be, since the price of heart's blood and heart's desire is pain, and for what thou gainest, thou must pay the price."

He ceased, and his hands fell to his sides and his white head drooped. He leaned to Nicanor, groping, old, and suddenly very feeble, and whispered:

"Son of men, I too have trod the path which thou art treading now. And I say to thee, seek thou sanctuary

while yet there may be time, for no man knoweth what the end shall be. And when thou art entered in, all else on earth shall matter nothing, for thou shalt be at peace. This I know, O Youth, and tell thee, for — I did not enter in."

He rose and laid a withered hand on Nicanor's bent, shaggy head.

"Unto each his own appointed work, and his own appointed fate, and the reward which he hath merited. Now peace be with thee!"

He turned away and passed onward into the falling night.

Thereafter the world unrolled itself between them, for they never met again.

Wrapped in his cloak, Nicanor lay and stared at the stars above him, and pondered those things which he had heard. And, because again he could not understand, he put upon them his own interpretation. But he at once began to make a tale about that old man, with his silver beard and his smiling eyes; and so he fell asleep, thinking that that was all there was in it.

When he awoke at break of dawn, he was inclined to think the whole a dream. But there was a new and softer mood upon him, greatly surprising to himself, and the black soul within him was tamed and stilled. So, in blindly superstitious obedience to the word of the strange old man, he turned his face away from Londinium and all that he longed to find there, back toward the life which was his, and the work which was his, and the Isle of Brambles in the fords.

And so came Fate, hard following on his heels.

II

FOR out of the gray mists of morning came soldiers, six or eight, with ring of weapons and shuffling thud of feet; and with them was a centurion in command. These overtook Nicanor where he went slowly back toward Thorney; and the centurion laid a rough hand upon him and bade him halt. Nicanor turned; but before he could ask angrily why they had stopped him, his wrists were fast in handcuffs and he was a prisoner in chains. He turned upon the centurion.

"Now what is this? I have done no wrong. I demand release!"

"Demand if it please thee," the soldier said. "But in truth I think thee something more than fool to let thyself be thus caught doddering by the way. To escape once, and baffle all the great lord Eudemius's searchers, and then be stumbled upon like any sheep — faugh! I expected better things of thee!"

"Now have I naught at all to do with the lord Eudemius!" said Nicanor. He explained, carefully, who he was, and whence he came and to whom he belonged, and they turned a deaf ear to him. He was the man they

sought, even the slave of Eudemius, escaped three days ago, with a reward out for his capture. This last explained it, but that Nicanor could not know. They insisted that they were in the right; all he could say and do would not convince them otherwise.

They skirted around Londinium by a street lined widely with tombs, and struck a road leading south and slightly west, which the men, talking among themselves, named the Noviomagus road. Ten miles, and they reached the station known by that name, and here took horse, with Nicanor mounted behind a guard. The road led through the neck of the great forest of Anderida, and came out again into the open, and they followed it until three hours after noon. Then they turned aside into a narrower branch road, and so rode easily for another hour until they entered a grove of ilex trees. To the farther end of this they came abruptly, and saw before them open country, a broad and gentle slope of hill; and on its summit a great stately house, white-walled, with outbuildings in the copse around it. In the centre of the blank wall of the front of the house which confronted them, was a gateway, with gates of bronze, and a porter's lodge. Here the porter, looking through his wicket, asked their business, and, being told, directed them around to the rear. So they entered at another smaller gate, and were in a court, open to the sky and surrounded on all sides by buildings, where slaves were working. This, Nicanor learned from the soldiers' talk, was in the quarters of the slaves.

And here the centurion found the overseer, and talked with him long and earnestly. The overseer paid over the reward, and the centurion, as Nicanor saw without at all

"'Were I that woman, I should have wanted to love him.'"

understanding the transaction, returned certain broad pieces, which the steward hid away upon himself with a furtive glance around. The soldier then departed with his men, his tongue in his cheek; and the overseer came to where Nicanor stood in chains, and looked at him. He was a very fat man, with little eyes sunk in unwholesome flesh, and was far haughtier than the great lord Eudemius himself. When he saw Nicanor's face, he began unexpectedly to curse and bluster, and said:

"How now, fellow! Is this a trick thou and thy mates have played upon me, to obtain my master's gold? Thou art not he who escaped three days ago."

But light had broken upon Nicanor, and he answered:

"So I told them, and so thou couldst have seen if thou hadst looked before thou didst pay — and receive back — thy master's gold. If this be thy practice, sure thy lord must be the poorer for thy loyal service!"

But the overseer was talking very fast, without paying heed at all.

"By my head, but this is a scurvy trick to play a man! But now thou art here, here shalt thou stay in that other's place; for it would go hard with me were my lord to learn that reward had been paid for nothing — and a slave is a slave to him."

Nicanor turned on him in a blaze of wrath, and the fat overseer, wary of the lean strength of him, called his men.

"Take him to the armorer's and have put upon him the collar. And on pain of punishment let no man say he is not the one who went away."

So they put upon him the brazen collar of slaveship, with the name of Eudemius engraved thereon; and set

him to work among the household slaves. And he, being alone, was helpless, and could do no more than bide his time as best he might.

But at first, when his bonds galled, he stormed, raging in fury at his impotence and the high-handedness of those who had betrayed him to his servitude. Finding that this brought him but blows and curses, and was of no manner of good, he calmed down and simmered inwardly. Then — and herein he surprised himself — he began to take an interest in this new life into which he had been cast. He had abiding faith in himself, and this is a thing of which every man has need; he was undergoing a new experience, which at the outset was interesting. When he became tired of it — well, he would then find means of escape. The work was not over hard, since there were many hands to lighten it; he was brought into contact with a magnificence of which he had never dreamed. As always, he kept his eyes and ears open; with his strange, sure prescience that all he could see and hear and know would be useful to him, somehow, somewhen, he set out to learn all he could of the life of the great mansion and of those who dwelt therein.

So he found out many things; and one day he found Varia, the great lord's daughter.

The house was so vast that one might lose himself with ease among its many halls and courts and passages if he did not know its plan. Nicanor, sent one day on an errand to the kitchens, reached them in safety; and then took the wrong way back, and found himself wandering in a part of the house new to him. This did not trouble him, for by then he was well known among the household servants, and was sure of soon meeting

some one who would set him right. So, quite without thought, he pushed open a door at random, and then abruptly lost all his wits through sheer amazement and delight.

For he was in a garden, beautiful to his eyes beyond all words, with broad terraces and gleaming marble steps where peacocks strutted; with at one end a fountain banked in a tangle of roses, where sprays of water fell with silvery splash and tinkle; with marble seats and statues gleaming from the cool gloom of trees. Around the garden were high walls, vine-hung, with the surrounding buildings of the villa for a broken background. An untamed profusion of green life rioted here; pale flowers of night, whose fragrance hung heavy on the air, swam in a sea-green dusk; ivy clung and clambered along the crannies of gray walls; roses sprawled in a red torrent of perfume over the yellowing images of old gods and heroes. In one corner a placid lake gazed still-eyed at the sky, with white swans floating on its mirrored black and silver. Nicanor drew breath with a quick pleasure which was almost pain; here one might think great thoughts and dream great dreams. For it was as a bit of that Forgotten Land of dreams, through which all men have journeyed, though the road to it is lost, with a glamour of mystery and a charm upon it which held him spellbound.

Out of the velvet shadow into the still evening light, one came toward him, in silence, with dark hair hanging in heavy braids on either side of her pale face, with dusky eyes and scarlet lips and jewels that glimmered in the folds of her perfumed robes. He bowed before her, keeping his eyes upon her face; for though he was

a slave, he was first a man, and next a poet, which means a lover of all things beautiful, and he had never seen a woman like her in all his life before.

"Who art thou?" she said. And though she was a great lady and the daughter of that noble house, she was yet a girl, and scarce beyond her childhood, and she drooped her head before his glance.

"Nicanor, thy slave," he answered, but his voice was not a slave's voice.

"Why art thou here?" she asked him. "This is mine own place, where none but I and my women come."

"I crave thy pardon, lady," he said; and told her how he came. In turn, her eyes rested on his face; and he, meeting them, felt his pulses leap to a sudden shock which sent the blood back pounding to his heart. For they were wandering eyes, awake and seeing, yet which slept, with no light of reason in them. So then he understood why the name of their lady was spoken throughout the household in hushed tones as of one dead; why she was so closely hidden from the eyes of the world. And she was the Lady Varia, — the lord Eudemius's only child, — the last of his great house, fair, futile flower.

"Nicanor," she repeated, with a pretty halting on the word. Her voice was low and dreaming, more tender than a dove's. "Where have I heard that name? Why, Nerissa hath told me thou art he who telleth tales to the men and maids at evening. See, it is evening now. Wilt not tell me too a tale? I should like it, for sometimes I am very lonely."

She was far above him as the stars; but she was a woman, and he a man — and the first tale was told within a garden. She held out a hand to him, and he took it

and touched it to his forehead, and it fluttered in his and then lay still. She led him to a bench by the sleeping lake, a child whose will might not be thwarted, and bade him tell her tales such as he told her men and maidens. This the sure instinct of his art taught him he might not do, since those tales which held them thralled were not for such as she. But he locked his hands about his knee, and thought an instant, his head flung back and his eyes intent and eager, with an odd shining deep within them.

So his tale began, in the deep-voiced chant which had rung out by moor and camp-fire, hushed now, that the peace of the evening's stillness might not be broken. She sat quite still beside him, her hands clasped childlike in her lap, listening with parted lips. The dusk deepened, and the golden moon hung over the surrounding wall and flooded the garden in wan hoary light. The pool lay a lake of silver in a black fringe of trees. The night flowers breathed forth drowsy perfume, making heavy the summer air. Nicanor's voice rolled on, endlessly through the scented darkness. . . .

Until Nerissa, the old nurse, came upon them suddenly, clamoring for her charge. Varia sprang to her and kissed her, with fond coaxing arms about her, so that she relented, since her lady's will was law. She dismissed Nicanor, and he crossed his arms before his face, and went away from Paradise.

Varia hid her face on her nurse's shoulder — poor groping soul that found its happiness in things so small — and said:

"He hath told me tales, Nerissa, so strange and wonderful that never was aught like them in all the world. I will have him to come again, for I am so happy —

so happy! And thou shalt not tell, for then he could not come, and he is not to suffer for it. Promise, Nerissa, dear Nerissa — it is but a little thing!"

Thus Varia.

And Nicanor — ah, Nicanor! That night there opened to him a new world, — a world of beauty and of sweetness and of pain. He, a son of the soil, knowing his roughness, his uncouthness, his bondage, never giving them a thought till then, had led her by the hand, a daughter of the stars, for a little space, the barriers down between them. One bit of common ground they had; beyond it, distance immeasurable and impassable.

That night Nicanor was once more seeking, always seeking, for something vague and left unnamed; past the river-ford of Thorney, where ever that night-long search began; and so through all the world to where a garden lay in moonlight. Here also he would have sought, for he knew that what he strove to find was waiting. But a web of moonlight held him back from entering; and from the outer darkness an old man's voice came to him, clear as a deep-toned bell, which said:

"The price of heart's blood and heart's desire is pain, and for what thou gainest, thou must pay the price."

III

N the garden was a little narrow door, vine-hung, which led to the outer world. No one ever used this door; for long years it had stood locked, and the key to it was lost, — so long lost that no one ever thought to look and see that the lock was clean and newly oiled that it might turn without noise; and the vines which half hid it on the inner side could tell no tales.

Marcus, oldest of all the many household slaves, white-headed and shrunken, and bent with the toil of years, squatted by the fire in the court of the slaves' quarters, cleaning a copper pot with a swab of twigs soaked in oil to pliancy. Within the house a feast was in progress, so that all the slaves were there on service, and Marcus had the fire to himself. He crooned softly as he scrubbed; and the flames struck gleams of light from the collar of brass about his neck and the round shining sides of the kettle, as it turned and twisted in his hands.

Presently Nicanor came into the circle of firelight, staggering under the weight of a great cask upon his back, with sweat-matted hair that streaked his face, and straining muscles. Out of the zone of light he passed,

with only the panting of labored breath and the pad of naked feet; and the darkness swallowed him. Following came another, also laden; and another, with a squat stone jar upon his shoulder; and yet another, each giving out every ounce of power within him, straining like a beast of burden beneath the yoke, that those in the great house might be served perfectly and without fault. They passed; and from the kitchens came a rattle of crockery, a hiss of burning fat, the shrill voices of cooks and scullery women.

Marcus flung his mop into the fire, got himself to his feet, and went after them, kettle in hand. The fire, left to itself, cast wavering gleams upon the dark walls about the court, the bare trodden ground, the covered well in its centre.

Marcus, seeking Nerissa to give the kettle to her, came to the garden, and stood in the entrance and looked across it. Further than this even he dared not venture, since all the space within was sacred to the lord's daughter and her women. Opposite him, across the open lawn, were the wide steps, white in the moonlight, leading to the tessellated walk above. Beyond this, light shone softly from Lady Varia's chamber, half screened by the tall slender columns of the gallery. The two windows, reaching to the floor and giving upon the terrace, were open to the warm air; in the room the lights were low. Marcus saw suddenly the Lady Varia herself enter the room alone, walking slowly, like one unwilling or tired. Then he would have gone, lest he be reprimanded; but even as he turned, the vines along the farther wall rustled, though no wind stirred. So that Marcus, faithful old watch-dog, drew back in the shadows and

waited, thinking no danger, yet bound to see that all was well.

This was what he saw: Lady Varia moving within the low-lighted room, pausing before her dressing-table near the tall silver lamp, to remove the weight of jewels which loaded her, aimless, and with slow uncertain steps like a child too weary to know rightly what it does. And from the darkness by the wall a figure coming with swift silent strides across the turf to the marble steps, black as a shadow in the moonlight, lean and lithe and with an untamed shock of hair. The figure stood upon the lowest step and called softly, — a tender, wordless call which drifted low across the night and scarcely reached to Marcus's ears. Marcus felt for the knife-hilt at his belt. But the Lady Varia, within the lighted room, heard the call, and stepped across the threshold with head raised and hands hanging at her sides like any sleep-walker, and crossed the pavement where the moonlight lay in silver, and came down the steps, slowly, yet hesitating never at all. Marcus, watching in wonder and fright and awe, saw the black figure lift her hand and kiss it; saw the two walk hand in hand across the garden into the dusky jungle of tall shrubbery. So that Marcus was in two minds, — whether to give the alarm at once, and have the intruder captured, or whether to go up quietly himself and find out what was going on.

In the end he crept along through the shadow beneath the walls; and presently, as he came, heard a voice speaking softly, yet with passion. The words were plainly audible, and Marcus heard, and crept closer yet and listened, — listened to words such as in all his stunted life he had never heard before; words which

stirred forgotten memories of other things once known, once loved and lost, which he understood in part, and felt more than he understood. He crouched in the shelter of a wide-leaved plant, seeing only the outline of a black figure on the stone bench, and a white one half lost in the darkness beside it. The spell of the voice wrapped him round, deep-toned, vibrant, yet hushed into accord with the stillness of the night. Bent on capture, he found himself all at once held captive, his mind swayed as grass in the wind to the sweep of that other's fancy. But abruptly the voice ceased, and the stillness settled deeper. Marcus heard a rustle of soft garments upon the bench; a low voice saying:

"More — more! Cease not, I pray thee, friend!"

And that other voice, answering:

"Nay, lady; what use? Something is wanting — the words will not come. I know not why, whether it be in me, or whether — "

"Nay, but I 'll have one more. Once thou didst begin to tell of a youth who was poor and lowly, who lived in the country of the north — "

"Does she, then, remember that?" Marcus muttered, "she, whose mind is water, where an image fades with the changing light? Eh, thou black-headed slaveling, what miracle hast thou wrought?"

"Wouldst have that tale?" Nicanor asked. "Ay, lady, once I did begin, and dared not finish. Dare I now? My faith! the trouble will not be for lack of words in this! So then; it was even as thou hast said. The youth lived in the gray northlands, up by the Great Wall, where gray hills roll over all the earth and gray skies look down upon them. He tended sheep upon these hills

for his father's lord, and lived upon black porridge and sour bread, and went clad in a sheepskin. And because he had never known that life held other things than these, it was all to him as it should have been. But there came a time when this youth went out into the world. He left his flocks and herds, with his lord's permission, and went down the long road to the south, past great cities where men lived in luxury and ease and other men toiled and sweated that this might be. He saw many strange faces, heard the babble of many tongues; and it seemed to him that each face was seeking for a thing which had no name, and each tongue was calling for what might not be found. And after a while the youth knew that he too was seeking what he could not find, and he wondered if it might be that same thing for which those stranger faces hungered. In the end, he came to a fair house, and dwelt there, among those ones who sat in luxury and ease and those others who toiled for them. And in this house was a certain place, of which was said: 'This spot is holy ground. Here none may enter rashly.' But the youth was rash, and entered."

His voice faltered. On the seat beside him the Lady Varia leaned forward.

"And then? —" she said softly.

"And there he found what he had been seeking," said Nicanor, very low. "What every soul upon this earth has a right to search for, but not every soul has a right to take. The name of this thing, O lady of mine, was Happiness; and some there be who call it also Love, and others there be who know that it is Pain. For in the garden dwelt one fair and pure and holy, — a daughter of the great ones of the earth. And because

she was fair he loved her; and because she was great he might not woo her; and because she was pure he would not stain her. For she had taught him to love as a woman may teach a man."

"He loved her?" Lady Varia said. Her voice was low and dreaming under the spell of his.

"Ay, lady of mine, he loved her!" Nicanor said; and in place of the vibrant tenderness of his voice was a swift fierce triumph. "He loved her, and nothing could do away with that." Once more his tones were hushed.

"On earth, between man and woman, are two kinds of love, my lady, — one which a man may teach a woman, which is quick desire and the bitter sweetness of passion, the meaning of a kiss, the thrill of a caress: and this, when all is said and done, is of earth, and of the flesh; and one which a woman may teach a man: and this is reverence, and tenderness, and holiness, and of the spirit. And she taught the youth this kind of love, my lady; taught him to revere and honor what in other women he had ever held lightly; taught him that because she was weak she was so strong that nothing he might do could prevail against her. And so — he went away."

"And she?" said the dreaming voice. "Did she love him?"

There fell a pause. In the bushes, close at hand, one strained his ears to listen, a naked knife gleaming in his hand.

"Ay," Nicanor answered slowly. He turned to her, not touching her, yet so close that he felt her breath on his sleeveless arm. "She loved him. And she did not know it."

"Not know it?" Varia said. She turned her face

toward him, and the moonlight fell full on the warm whiteness of her throat. "I think she should have known. And then, she being great, and he so lowly, I think she should have told him that she knew."

"If — if you were she," said Nicanor, and his voice shook, "would you have told him?"

"Oh, I should have told him!" Varia said, and her voice was low and strained. "I should have said — 'I want you to love me! I want you to love me and stay with me always —'"

Nicanor bowed his face forward on his hands. Lady Varia, leaning forward, put her hand upon his shoulder.

"Were I that woman, I should have wanted to love him if he had been like that," she said, tremulously, yet very sweetly.

Nicanor straightened up and caught both her hands.

"Ah, no, my lady, you would not!" he said hoarsely. "You would have driven him from you and been angered beyond forgiveness. You would have hated and despised him, because — oh, don't you understand, it is the only thing you could have done! If she had said that — how could — how could he have left her?"

"But why did he leave her?" Varia asked. "Could he not have stayed always in the garden?"

Nicanor mastered himself with an effort.

"No," he said thickly. "Because he was only a man — and some day — it would be more than he could endure. If he saw that in her sweet innocence she did not realize the temptation she held out to him, he might — he might have done that which always after he must regret."

He raised her face with one hand and looked at her.

Her eyes were closed, her red mouth quivered. He hesitated, his breath coming hard; then he bent his head and kissed her. As he took her in his arms, she shivered, crying softly:

"I am afraid! Oh, what is this that you would do!"

But when he loosened his hold she clung to him, murmuring:

"Nay, I am not afraid! I love your kisses. Oh, you must not go as did that youth — always you must stay within this garden —"

Then Marcus crept from his shelter and stood before them, silent, his knife gleaming in his hand. Nicanor, lifting his head, saw him suddenly, and started, for this meant death by tortures no man might name. He sprang to his feet and thrust Lady Varia behind him in the same motion, so that in the darkness his body hid her as she crouched upon the bench. Marcus snarled, like an aroused watch-dog, and said:

"Thou more than fool! Dost know what this night's work will bring thee?"

Nicanor, his heart pounding hard, his hands clenched, answered nothing, glancing about him to see if the old man might be alone. But the garden lay silent. Then he sprang, as a wolf springs, straight for the old slave's throat, and felled him. Lady Varia screamed, — a quick, shrill sound which stabbed the night stillness like a knife, and cried:

"Oh, kill him not — kill him not! I pray thee, kill him not!"

"Hush thee, dear lady, or the house will be upon us!" Nicanor exclaimed, his words rushing through locked

teeth. "Get quickly to thy chamber and leave all things to me."

She sped away over the turf, panting with fear and excitement, and flitted up the steps and across the marble walk and into her room, and closed the window. Nicanor, kneeling on the slave's chest, gagging him with a wad torn from his own garment, heard the doors shut with a gasp of relief. He tied the old man's arms tightly with his girdle, trussing him as he had trussed the carcasses of sheep to be loaded upon mules. Then, having him bound and helpless, he rose and stood over him, whetting his knife on his hand, with senses keyed to hear footsteps in every stir of leaf and sigh of wind. But the garden lay always silent under the moon's cold eye. He spoke to his captive, in a voice which grated just above a whisper.

"I 'll not kill thee now, since she begged thy life, old man. But while thou 'rt above the ground there 's no more peace for me. Now what to do with thee?"

He stood over his prisoner, motionless in meditation, muttering his thoughts aloud.

"There 's no place within the house to keep thee safe. And if that clacking tongue of thine betrays us, it needs not much to fancy what will happen then. This is what comes to pass when one serves a brutal master, old man; one must e'en be a brute one's self. I cannot kill thee; they 'd miss thee and start a search — besides, my lady said me nay. Ha, that makes thee squirm? Ay, she 'd be mine for the lifting of my finger — even I, Nicanor, thy master's slave, have but to say to her, thy master's daughter, 'Go thither!' and she goes, and 'Come!' and she comes to me as I will. Hearest thou that, old man?

Her lips have been defiled by a slave's kisses; she hath lain unresisting in a slave's arms, to the unending shame of her proud lord father. And why do I tell thee this, old man? To see thee writhe, thou also, at that shame; to have thee know the whole, and never profit by thy knowledge. Again I say, I cannot kill thee, but none the less I 'll stop that tell-tale mouth of thine. Look you, it 's the choice between my life and thy eager tongue which even now yearns to blab the tale of my sin and her disgrace. Therefore — "

He knelt above his captive, who glared at him with bloodshot eyes that glittered in the moonlight. He tested the keenness of his blade, shook back his shaggy hair, and with a sudden twist removed the gag from the old man's jaws, choking back, at the same moment, with pitiless hands, the cry which rose to his lips. Then he bent over, so that the bulk of him hid from the moonlight his victim and his work. There was a single glint of steel, a convulsion of the thin figure on the ground; a faint click, and a choked and gurgling cry, instantly suppressed. Then Nicanor cleaned his blade by driving it thrice deep into the soft ground, and stood up; and Marcus rolled over and over in agony at his feet, with inarticulate animal cries which scarcely rose above the silence of the night. Nicanor unloosed his bonds and touched him with his foot.

" Hereafter thou 'lt hold thy peace, old man! Neither good nor ill wilt thou ever prate of mortal more, for I 've drawn thy sting. Once thou wert kind to me; twice, in return, did I steal for thee, and once took a beating from thy shoulders. But thou wert more loyal to thy master than thou wert friend to me — and in a matter

such as this, I take no chances. As I have served thee, so will I serve any man who crosses me. Now go. Wash thy mouth with cold water and chew pounded leaves of betel. It will stop the blood."

He left the garden with noiseless strides, a black shadow in the moonlight. Marcus got himself slowly to his feet, moaning like an animal in pain. He shook his fist at the vanishing figure, with uncouth and terrible sounds which had once been speech, but even then were none the less a curse. So, shuddering and crying, he crept from the sleeping garden, where all was still and peaceful, and where pain and sorrow should have had no place.

And never again was that garden so peaceful and so still, for Life had entered it, by the little narrow door, bringing with it what Life must bring.

IV

NICODEMUS, the freedman, one-eyed, short, immensely broad, beetle-browed, and grizzled, stood in the door of his wine-shop and watched the crowding press of travellers at the marsh-ford, forerunners of the throng which nightly descended upon Thorney. Behind him, in the dim recesses of the smoky shop, his wife, Myleia, hawk-nosed and slatternly, prepared food for the strangers who would soon be upon them clamoring for bed and board. It was early evening, with a faint twilight haze still tinged with pink and primrose; but already lights were twinkling here and there among the clustered houses, and fires had been started on the beach.

There was no more excitement at the ford than was usual at that hour; the noise was no greater, the confusion no more profound; yet Nicodemus watched it all intently, as though he had not seen it every night before. His one eye, small and hotly blue beneath its bushy brow, glinted over the bustling scene; watched a dozen men flogging a horse that had slipped in mid-stream and fallen with its pack, blocking a long file of animals and carts behind it; followed three half-drunken soldiers

lurching through the shallow water, using their pikes as staves; lingered over a bloody battle between two carters whose wheels had locked; and suddenly sobered into gravity at sight of a figure striding through the ford, in worn leathern jerkin and brazen cap, with a ponderous leaf-shaped sword swinging at its side. At sight of this one, Nicodemus turned and went within.

The shop, lighted dimly by an evil-smelling lamp, showed small and low-ceiled. Jars of cheap wine and casks of ale and beer, with an array of drinking-cups of all shapes and sizes, stood on shelves along the wall at one side. A trestled board, much scarred and hacked, ran down the centre of the room, flanked by rows of stone stools. Built around two sides of the room was a series of rude bunks. Over the edge of one of these a head of rough and matted black hair was visible. An odor of stale liquor, scorched meat, and pungent wood-smoke hung heavy in the air. Myleia entered, from the kitchen beyond, with a tray of half-cooked beef. Nicodemus went to the bunk and shook the occupant ungently.

"Valerius is here!" he said. His voice, like himself, was rough and brusque, rumbling hollow from the depths of his cavernous chest. The figure in the bunk stirred and muttered. Nicodemus turned his head.

"He 'll not sleep this off for another six hours," he growled. "Wife, some water."

The hawk-nosed woman came to his side with a jug of water. As she gave it to him, she put one hand, gnarled, distorted by work, hairy as a man's, on his broad shoulder, and he put his own hand up over it. They stood silent, looking down at the black head

buried in the dingy blankets. The lamplight fell suddenly on their faces, throwing them into relief against the murky gloom of the room. Nicodemus grunted, and without warning emptied the water over the black head. Myleia laughed huskily. The remedy was partially effectual. The head rose dripping from the blankets, with dazed and drunken eyes.

"Pull thyself together, Nicanor, lad!" Nicodemus said sharply. "Valerius is coming for thee. Thou hast overstayed thy leave; he is to take thee back to the house of thy lord. Dost understand?"

Nicanor, answering nothing, sat upright with an effort, pressing his hands to his head, his body swaying slightly from the hips. Nicodemus put a hand on his shoulder.

"Come!" he urged.

Nicanor looked at him, blinking stupidly. Still he did not speak, but moistened his lips with a swollen tongue. He began to sink slowly back into the blankets, supine and inert. Nicodemus sat on the edge of the bunk and passed a long gorilla arm about his shoulders. He motioned to his wife, who stood watching, arms akimbo, her face expressive of lively sympathy. She went to the shelves where stood the jars of liquor, returning with a brimming horn cup. Nicodemus took this, tilted back the heavy head at his shoulder, and started to pour its contents down Nicanor's throat. Nicanor choked, gasped, and swallowed automatically.

A black figure blocked out the twilight in the door.

"Peace be with ye, friends! What 's all this?" said a hearty voice. Valerius entered; saw the face of the patient, and stopped short.

"Nicanor!" he exclaimed. "Why, I 'm come for him. He should have been back last night. Hito — prince of overseers — hath a black mark against him. Drunk again?"

Nicodemus nodded casually. "Bide a bit, friend, and I 'll have him in shape. He 's awake now."

Nicanor, slowly recovering his sodden wits, looked at Valerius, recognizingly, opened his mouth to speak, found the exertion too great, and shut it again. He let his head sink back against Nicodemus. Presently, with his eyes closed, he said thickly:

"You, Valerius? What now?"

"I want you, my friend," said Valerius, promptly. "It would seem you forget the trifling fact that Hito commanded your return last night. While you wear the collar, you 'll have to heed the word of him who holds the chain — mark you that. You 're in for a flogging as it is — best not let your case get to higher quarters." He turned to Nicodemus. "Can we get him started, think you?"

Nicodemus let the shaggy head drop back into the bunk, and rose.

"Let him bide an hour and he 'll be ready for you," he suggested. "Which is to say that he 'll be able to walk, with help. Sit you down, comrade — the night 's young yet."

He beckoned Valerius with him to the table, with a nod at Myleia. She brought cups and an ampulla of wine — not from among those upon the shelves. Valerius, with a grunt of satisfaction, pushed his sword out of his way and sat down. But voices at the door, a shout, a pounding of horses' hoofs, recalled Nicodemus to his

duties as host. He signed to Valerius to help himself, and hurried to the door.

The twilight had deepened into dusk, through which the fires at the ford glowed redly. The air, sharp with the evening chill, was vibrant with sounds of preparation for the night. Outside the wine-shop door a group was gathered, — three men mounted, three others afoot. One of the latter, a slave, was calling lustily for admittance, beating with his staff upon the door.

"Here, lords, here!" cried Nicodemus in alarm. "What may the lords be pleased to want?"

"Food and drink and a place to sleep if you have it," said one on horseback. His voice was full and resonant and very deep; the tones of one used to command men. Another added querulously:

"This place is crowded to the doors. Every public-house — Say quick if you can take us in, for a cloud of vermin is swarming at our heels, ready to snap the food from our very jaws."

Nicodemus's eye, long used to sizing up the purses of would-be customers, lighted to quick and eager greed.

"All I have is at your lordships' service. You say truly; Thorney is crowded, so that many will sleep on the naked ground to-night."

There came a group of weary carters along the street, smelling loudly of drink and of the stables, clamoring at every crowded house for bed and board. Nicodemus saw the disgusted scorn with which the lord who had last spoken regarded these; saw the other two on horseback turn away as though contaminated by the very atmosphere of their presence, — an atmosphere none too sweet, in truth, — and promptly took his cue.

"Nay, friend," said he to the foremost carter, as they clustered close around, hopeful at last of shelter. "You 're too late — I 'm full. Best go to the Black Cock — a step further down the street. There you 'll find all you ask for."

"The Black Cock be full also," the man protested sulkily. "You have room to spare! See then, friend, we 'll pay 'ee well."

But Nicodemus, fearful lest his golden geese should fly, turned on him fiercely.

"Get ye gone! I 've no time to dicker over coppers. I 'm full, I tell you, and that 's all there is to it. — This way, lords."

He led his guests into the house, shouting for Myleia to come and put up the horses. Two wore the dress of private citizens of wealth; the equipment of the third and youngest proclaimed him a military tribune. The face of this one, the most noticeable of the trio — a man of some seven-and-thirty years — was pale and aristocratic, with high nose, thick and level brows, a thin-lipped mouth at once refined and sensual. And the eyes were the eyes of a son of Rome the Mighty, dark, keen, dominant, impatient of restraint. Behind them one might read what the man himself stood for; the epitome of centuries of culture, of severest physical training and the restraint of the discipline of the mightiest machine the world had ever seen; and, at the same time, of equal centuries of indulgence and luxury and vice — a curious mingling of ascetic and sybarite. Of the other two, one bore a marked resemblance to the soldier, with the pride and passion of the younger face tempered by years to a mellower dignity. He was richly dressed, and on his

thumb was a large and heavily chased signet ring. The third man, who at first spoke little, keeping his eyes cast down, was small and shrivelled, with a scholar's face and a distinct cast in the right eye.

These three sat at the table, whence Valerius had hurriedly removed himself and his wine, and were served obsequiously by Nicodemus and his wife with the best the house afforded. For a while they ate and drank in silence. Then the tongue of the small old man, loosened by the wine, began to wag. He spoke abruptly, in a voice husky and somewhat over-precise.

"I had not looked to see thee here, friend Marius. Thy father made no mention of thy coming."

"He knew nothing of it," the young tribune answered shortly. "There was no time to send word from Gaul — where I have been stationed these last two years — that I had been ordered into Britain. And when I arrived, he was travelling, and my letter did not reach him."

"He came with his legion, which is that one sent hither by the proconsul Ætius of Gaul, at the request of the governors of the cities to drive out the barbarians from Britannia Secunda. And that was nine months ago," his father explained.

"So; I see. It was gallant work of gallant men," said the old man with effusion. The soldier shrugged his broad shoulders in an indifference half contemptuous. "And thou hast remained in Britain since thy comrades sailed back to Gaul?"

"The commander left certain men to guard against further outbreak," the father of Marius explained, patiently. "And my son is of that number. But the

trouble seems thoroughly subdued, and they have been ordered to return to Gaul."

"I have applied for leave by the physicians' orders, having been wounded during the affair," said Marius. "Myself I know that I am fit for service, but I am constrained—" Again he shrugged. "A campaign hath been started in Gaul against the Huns who threaten us, and you may guess if I like the prospect of missing it. Until my leave is granted, I am here to make arrangements for a vessel for my cohort. After, I shall remain for some weeks; it is long since my father and I have been together."

"And those weeks, I doubt not, you will spend together at the house of Eudemius," the old man persisted, and received a curt grunt of assent. Undeterred by lack of enthusiasm of his hearers, he settled to the discussion of a new subject.

"It is years since I have seen him, but men say that he is greatly changed, since the physicians have failed to mend his daughter's misfortune."

The soldier, staring moodily into his horn cup, made no sign of having heard. His father poured himself more wine, and nodded. The old man added, with a chuckle and a senile attempt at jocularity:

"Marius, boy, thou shouldst but see her! Not a goddess of Rome herself could equal her. Eh, but she 's the morsel for thy lips, she and her fat lands and the gold of her father's coffers. And it were high time thou shouldst think of marriage."

"I care nothing for damaged goods," Marius interrupted. "And as for marriage, that may well wait awhile."

"But since thou art to visit the father, it is but meet that thou shouldst become enamoured of the daughter, for the time at least. What else could be expected of thee?" quavered he of the cast. He poured himself another cup of wine; his hand, none too steady, shook, and the liquor spilled. Hereat he wept, dolefully, and forgot his discourse on the duty of guests to their hosts' daughters. Unheeding him, the others talked quietly, in low tones. But he, bound to hold the centre of the stage, remembered suddenly what he wished to say, and began again.

"My boy, thou couldst have her for the taking!"

Marius, his speech with his father interrupted, eyed him with a sort of grim patience, waiting until he chose to cease.

"A fit morsel for thy lips," the garrulous one repeated. "I speak of what mine eyes have seen. What if the mind be wanting, so long as the face is fair? Many a man hath found too much mind a sorry investment in a wife. And she's fair enough! By Venus, yes! Eyes like clouded stars, midnight tresses, a bosom whiter than milk —"

Marius laughed scornfully.

"Maybe so! But so have a thousand others, with sense thrown in. Why so keen to set me after her? Let the poor fool be. I tell you I'll have no damaged goods. If I marry at all, by the veil of Isis, the price I must needs pay will be high enough to warrant me in asking the best in return."

Nicanor, hearing the murmur of voices, raised his head slowly and looked over the edge of the bunk. He saw Valerius in his corner, sound asleep, and wondered what he wanted there. The old man sat with his back

to him, but the face of the soldier was in plain sight. At him Nicanor stared, stolidly, without interest, and let himself drop back into the blankets. But the remedy of Nicodemus was beginning to have effect. By degrees his head became clearer; objects in the room no longer jumped startlingly when he set his glance upon them; his thoughts became more connected. There had been a scene in a garden — her garden. Marcus had come; had discovered him with her. His heart stood still. What had happened then? Had he killed the old man? He recalled the truth with a gasp of relief which yet was mingled with apprehension. But afterwards? There came to him, slowly, a memory, vague and confused, of a weary wandering through endless night, torn by temptation and desire, raging with defiance of the consequences of his rashness, consumed by fever that ran through his veins like fire and dried the very heart within him. What had become of Varia? Of Marcus? How much had been found out? Sudden blind fury at his impotence in the face of supreme and arrogant power possessed him. The brazen collar about his throat burned like a band of fire. He raised his hands to it, and let them drop. What could he do — a slave? After all, what did it matter? Nothing mattered then, save Varia. He lay devising ways and means of seeing her again, since this he was bound to do, though gods and men might say him nay. The voices at the table droned on, as from a great distance, and Nicanor lay and listened. They spoke of some woman. No name was mentioned, but the description of her, as it fell from the old man's maudlin lips, sent his heart pounding. So might be described another woman, who for him held life and

death and all that lay between. The voice of Valerius at his ear made him start.

"Awake, lad? Art better? So, then; it's time to start."

Nicanor got out of the bunk. Once on his legs, he discovered that he was by no means steady. The three at the table ceased talking as he rose, more from prudence than curiosity, it seemed. The soldier glanced at him, with keen eyes, indifferent at first, lighting to faint professional interest, that noted every point of bearing and physique; the lean flanks, swelling upward to muscular torso and the shoulders of a chariot-racer; the knotted muscle of forearm and back; finally rested on the broad collar circling the brown massive throat.

"That fellow would look well in the ranks," he observed casually. His father glanced at Nicanor as one might at a dog whose good points were under discussion, and nodded. Marius added, continuing what had gone before:

"You can't kill a man with hard work if you know how to handle him. I tell Fabian that these brushes with barbarians at least serve the purpose of keeping the men in condition."

His father sighed.

"Always thou wert a hard taskmaster, Marius," he said gently. "It may be that thou drivest the men farther than thou knowest. Men are not brute beasts, that they must be goaded even to the breaking-point."

"Most men are, my father," Marius returned. "Most men will do what they are made to do, no more. As for driving them to breaking-point, I think you need not fear for that. Men need a lot of killing."

He fell into silence, staring into the amber depths of his cup of wine. His father glanced at him, sighed once more, and turned away. Nicodemus and Myleia hurried in to prepare fresh beds for their lordly guests. Valerius and Nicanor went out into the night.

The keen air struck Nicanor like a dash of cold water. He drew a deep and grateful breath of it, and felt revived.

"How long have I been from the house?" he asked, with intent to fill in the blank spaces of his memory.

"It is the second night," Valerius answered. "When you asked Hito for leave, he gave command that you return last night."

"When I asked Hito —" Nicanor repeated. He had no recollection of having asked the overseer for anything.

"You did not come, so, being angry, he directed me to search for you and bring you back for a flogging. What more was in store, he did not say."

Nicanor shot a glance of swift suspicion at him through the darkness.

"What more should there be?" he demanded.

"Why, how can I tell?" Valerius parried. "Imprisonment, maybe, for a day or so. . . . Though, in truth, as the offence is repeated by some one or other every day, he can have no excuse for —"

"Well?" Nicanor said impatiently, as Valerius paused.

"Treating you as he would like to do," the latter added soberly. "Hito hates you, my friend."

Nicanor shrugged his shoulders. This tale of an overseer's feelings was not what he had feared.

"Oh, that!" he exclaimed, and snapped his fingers. "If that were all I had to think about. . . . Valerius, tell me this. Each time I have seen you I have wished to

ask. How comes it that you are in the service of the Torturer?"

"I got tired of the church," Valerius answered simply. "The good fathers were very good, but me they singled out as the black sheep of all the fold, and it was more than could be endured. 'What religion have you?' says Father Ambrose. 'None at all,' says I, 'and want none.' So he nearly wept, and told the others, and they agreed that I was fit food for the fires of hell. So they gave me their blessing, and told me Holy Church was better off without me, and there were no more sandals to be repaired. Then I fell in with Hito, and he took me into the service of our lord. How hath it been with you?"

Nicanor told of the manner of his capture, and Valerius laughed.

"Clever!" he chuckled. "But tell me truth, lad. Is not this a long sight better than the work-room of that fish-faced brother Tobias? Are we not hand in glove with the great ones of the earth? Do we not know them, in all their parts, far better than those of their own world could ever do, since we serve them?"

"Ay," said Nicanor. "That is so. And yet, after all — when I was in the workshop, if the bone cut straight, and if there was what I liked for supper, I was happy, and wanted nothing more. Now —"

"Now," said Valerius, dropping into his old familiar tone, with an arm thrust through Nicanor's — "now thou hast found that there are many other things in life which a man may want. Is it not so?"

"Ay," Nicanor said again. "That is so also."

V

IN the slaves' quarters, next morning, Nicanor took his flogging without a change of face, while Hito, the fat overseer, looked on and grinned in evil glee. But Nicanor had so much worse than flogging hanging over him that he scarcely felt the blows, and merely grinned back at Hito, with insolent bravado, until the latter was cursing with rage. Then, being set to grind sand for the floors of the kitchens, he made an opportunity to seek out Marcus. But Marcus was nowhere to be found. Nicanor questioned, cautiously; no one had seen him. Apparently, no one cared what had become of him. He might have been rotting in sewer or drain-hole for all his fellow-slaves seemed concerned. To save his life Nicanor could not have told just why he wished to find the old man, since the farther he and Marcus were apart, the better it would be for both.

Foiled in his search, he went back to work again. Many times before his labor was ended, he passed the closed door of the garden where Varia dwelt; and each time his heart beat hard and his face flushed and his brown hands trembled. To know her so near, and not

to see her; to be conscious of her in every throbbing pulse, and not to seek her; not to know whether she was safe and unharmed, or whether blame for his rashness had fallen, through her father's wrath, on her —

"Last night I could have gone to her had I not chosen to make myself a drunken swine," he said, and caught himself up in fear lest he had spoken the words aloud. "Did she look for me — wait for me? — for I 'll warrant she has not forgotten. But to-night — to-night — "

He caught his breath, his eyes lighting.

"I 'll make her confess she loves me! I 'll have the words from her own lips — words, ay, and kisses also! Ah, lord, noble lord, mighty lord! what wouldst say to know that for the lifting of a slave's finger thou standest to lose what all thy gold could never buy thee back?" His passion died before it had fairly gathered force. He stood an instant, motionless and shaken, drew a hand across his eyes, and returned to his labor.

All that day Hito worked him mercilessly, in a mean and entirely comprehensible spirit of revenge, until, being not fully recovered from his drinking-bout, his brain was reeling and he could scarcely keep his legs. At sunset he took his share of the rations dealt out nightly to the slaves, but although he was faint from emptiness the sight of the food turned him sick. He went to the cell where he, with others, slept, and dropped like a log, exhausted in mind and body. Here he lay until Hito's whistle summoned the household slaves for emergency service. Not to obey meant punishment, but in his present state Nicanor cared little for that. He lay listening to the sound of hasty feet and voices as slaves passed to and fro across the courtyard to the

house, expecting momently to be called to account for his delinquency. But no one came to him, and by and by he slept.

Waking, he found the world dark and peopled with restless, moving shadows. There was still much hurrying here and there, and from the kitchens came strident sounds of nervous activity. Thither Nicanor started, across the unlighted court, stopping on the way for a cup of water at the well. As he put down the dipper and turned to go, he ran into some one bound in the same direction, who staggered under the shock with an exclamation, and dropped a dish, which crashed into fragments on the ground. At the same instant Nicanor caught her by the shoulder and steadied her; in the darkness he could not see her face.

"It is broken!" she exclaimed. "I must go quickly and get another."

"It was my fault," said Nicanor. "I will go."

"There is no need," the woman answered.

She started back, Nicanor keeping perversely beside her.

"What is happening?" he wished to know. "Is there a feast made in the house to-night?" He could feel that she was looking at him in surprise.

"You do not know? Two strangers came to-day, with news of importance, men say, for our lord. There be strange things told: they urge that our lord will go back with them to Rome. The old man was indisposed when he arrived; his servant tells that he is not over strong."

She hurried off, and Nicanor stood still, repeating stupidly her words.

"Our lord will go back with them to Rome. Then she will go with him. But that is not possible. His home is here — why should he leave it?" At once he was filled with feverish anxiety to find out what truth there might be in the gossip.

He invented an errand which would take him within the house, to see if by chance Lady Varia might be among the feasters. Since she was kept in strictest seclusion by Eudemius, he was quite sure of not finding her, but his mood of perversity still held. On the way he met a Saxon slave, Wardo, a fair-haired, blue-eyed fellow, hurrying toward the atrium with a pierced copper bowl packed with snow for cooling wines. Him Nicanor stopped with a question.

"Hast seen these strangers, Wardo? Whence come they, and who have been bidden to meet them?"

"They and our lord sup alone," Wardo answered. He shifted his bowl from hand to hand, and blew on his fingers as though it burned instead of freezing him. "The dancing girls have been commanded, and wine is to be brought. Much hath been brought already. And Nicanor, hark 'ee! Egon, who pours the wines, saith that the talk is strange talk for feasting. They urge that our lord go back with them to Rome — wherefore, think you? They speak of Rome, and Londinium, and the legions from Gaul, and of losses of ships and money, until one's head rings. What might it be about? Think you that we go to Rome? I should like to go to Rome, if it be anything like Londinium —"

"We go to Rome?" Nicanor repeated. "Say rather that we should be left here to die like chained rats that the trainer hath forgotten."

He went off; and watched his chance and slipped away outside, and stopped before the little garden door. He put his hand upon it, drew back, and glanced over his shoulder as though for possible pursuit. His face held a curious mixture of doubt and boldness, hesitancy and desire. Only a moment he paused; then opened the door with a silent key, slipped inside so that the vines scarcely rustled, and closed it without noise.

No one was in the garden. His eagerness took fire at the delay; lithe and silent as a mountain cat he crossed the open space of lawn, mounted the steps of the terrace, and gained the windows, whence came no light from the tall silver lamps within. And here he discovered that the windows were closed. With all his boldness he dared venture no further. Baffled, yet keener set in his determination for being thwarted, he drew back into the shadows and waited.

From where he stood by the marble bench no sound came to him save the chirring of insects in the grass, the squeak of a bat or twitter of a sleepy bird. One might never have thought the place to be in the heart of a house whose inmates numbered five hundred souls and more, so still it was, so seemingly remote from all human noise and tumult. The combined effects of the silence and the perfume of the many night-blooming plants made him drowsy; also his head was light from want of food. Every clump of bushes seemed suspicious; he began at last to hear footsteps in every sough of wind and creak of branch. But he set his teeth grimly, bound not to be beaten, fighting hard against sleep and overwhelming weariness. Yet what it meant for him should he, in spite of himself, fall asleep and be

discovered there by Lady Varia's women, none knew better than he.

"She will come! She must come!" he muttered, and kept himself awake with that.

And she did come. After untold hours of waiting, during which he alternately dozed and started into uneasy watchfulness through sheer force of will, she came to him out of the scented darkness, walking slowly, with hands hanging straight at her sides, a slim figure dimly white. So suddenly did she appear that at first he did not move, believing himself still drowsing. But she stopped before him; and at once the world fell away from him, leaving him thought and memory of nothing but that she had come to him at his call and that they were alone together.

"I am here," she said, very low. "Didst call me, or did I dream it? And why?"

"Because I wanted thee!" he answered, and caught her hands and kissed them. His own hands shook as he drew her down upon the bench beside him; he dared not trust his voice to utter what was on his tongue. She sat beside him, leaving her hands in one of his, and he slipped his arm about her, unrebuked. In the darkness he could not tell whether or not her eyes were on him. Presently she spoke.

"Hast thou not a tale to tell to-night? Last night thou didst not come, and I was lonely. All the night I did not sleep. Now I am tired — so tired. . . ."

Her voice drifted into silence. She yawned, quite openly, like a sleepy child, and leaned her head slowly back against his arm. Nicanor quivered from head to foot, and tightened his clasp about her. It was these

innocent tricks of hers, these child ways, wholly trusting, without thought of guile, that made him mad for her, tempted him almost beyond endurance, and yet, in their very innocence, made themselves her strongest shield. She knew nothing, with that child's soul of hers, of the passion which shook him at her touch, which sent his hands hot when her fingers fluttered into his, and set his heart pounding in heavy throbs when, as now, she leaned her cheek above it. How should she know? Her mind was a child's mind, unawakened, even though her body was a woman's body, fragrant cup of the mystic wine of life, abounding in sweet allurements of which she knew not the smallest meaning.

"I would have another tale!" she said at length, imperiously, and raised her head to look at him in grieved surprise that her command should be so slighted. But Nicanor drew her back to him, lifting both her cool palms to his burning face.

"Ah, lady mine!" he said, "the only tale I have to tell thee, I may not utter. None other have I to-night; my heart is big with it, my brain reels with it, but my lips must e'en be dumb. And yet — I know that thou wouldst listen; that what I might say would echo in thy heart forever and a day. Then why should I not say it? Why, if the thorns be not strong enough to guard, should I not pluck the rose?"

He gathered her more closely into his arms, drinking the perfume of her hair, the warmth of her, into every fibre of his being. She lay quiet, her head thrown back against his shoulder, great eyes wide open in the darkness, resting easily as a bird in its nest against his strength.

"Because the rose is too fair and fragrant for common hands to pluck." Nicanor's voice grew to a hushed intensity, as though he argued with himself a point gone over many times before, yet never wholly gained — what higher manhood there was in him contending with temptation innocently offered, striving against lawless passion and desire. "Now it is but a half-blown bud, this rose, knowing nothing of the perils which beset all roses in all gardens, lady mine, hiding the golden heart of it in shy, half-open leaves. Some day a high-born stranger will enter the garden, and the gardener will point to this his rose, and say: 'Look you, friend, at the fair flower I have nurtured here. I have tended it well, kept from it frost and blasting heat, watered it, let the sun to shine upon it. Now it is ready for the plucking — take you it.' Then the stranger will pluck the rose, and will watch it unfold, petal by petal, until all the beauty of it is laid bare. And gardener nor stranger will ever know that one was in the garden there before them, with his hand upon the rose's stem and his breath upon the rose's heart."

Varia stirred and brushed a hand across his lips.

"But that is not a tale!" she said plaintively. "Or if it be a tale, it is a sad one. The poor rose! It may be that it wished to stay within the garden, and not be plucked to fade away and die. I had not thought of that before! Never will I pluck a rose again; I will let it live where the gardener plants it. I thought it pretty to pluck them and smell them, and watch the leaves all fall; I did not know I killed them! Sometimes I think that people do not know when they kill roses. Now tell another tale, I pray thee! Tell that tale of when thou

and I lived long and long ago, and of how we met in that other world which is gone. That tale I love the best of all."

"Of how we met—" Nicanor repeated absently. Again his mood had changed, as always in her presence. When away from her, with but the memory of her face, her innocent wiles, her passiveness under his caresses, passion had its way with him, blinding him, rendering him desperate, careless of consequences. But when with her, that very innocence of hers wrought its own spell upon him, taming and stilling him with an awe which he but half understood. Curiously, this chastened mood left him invariably sullen and surly, after the manner of a beast which sulks at having missed its kill.

"Of how we met?" he said again. "So then. Once thou and I lived very long ago. Ages and ages ago it was, when the world was young, and only the moon and the stars were old. None walked upon the earth save we two, and the world and its beauty was for us alone. Dusky forests covered all the land, where strange birds sang and great flowers grew. Wild beasts roamed these forests with us, but we walked among them unafraid, for they knew not that they could harm us. Beneath the sunken light of old scarred moons we wandered hand in hand; and day by day I told that tale to thee I dare not tell thee now, and there was none to hinder me.

"Canst dream of a world all happiness, my lady, a world without shadow of sorrow or cloud of care, with nothing but happy sunshine and the songs of birds? That world was our world. And in it we were free, we two, free to wander where we would, free as the

winds that called us. Who may know freedom as do those who walk in chains? We knew not then the measure of this our freedom, for we had known no thraldom of flesh nor spirit. Therefore the high gods decreed that we should be brought to know the greatness of their gift, by losing it; that in our lives to come we should be bound, and bound remain until we knew what we had lost. Thy bonds sit upon thee lightly, yet in thine eyes I read that they are there. And I — I am learning fast what freedom means. In the shade of great trees which upheld the very floor of heaven we rested, thou and I, and saw the wide earth smiling in warm golden noons. It was then thy hands first learned to cling to mine" — he raised her hands and kissed them — "it was then thy head first leaned above my heart — ay, even so long since, in the beginning of the world. Down all the after ages it hath been the same; somewhere, somehow, we met; and each time of our meeting there came to us a memory of dear dead days long gone, forgotten until a breath from dim gardens where we wandered blew to us from the past. Oh, but those days were long, each one a jewel of flame and azure, strung on the golden chain of Time; and the nights were long, and warm, and clear, and perfumed as thy hair. Our food was fruit and the nuts I gathered; our wine the waters of clear brooks which thou drankest from my hands. Ferns, deep and fragrant, made our couch."

He stopped abruptly.

"As my soul liveth, I can tell no more!" he said, and his voice was shaken. "Sweet lady o' mine, urge me not, for thine own sake! Thou dost not understand

— how shouldst thou? Any tale I 'll tell thee — any tale save a tale of thee and me."

"That is the tale which I will have," said Varia, drowsily.

Nicanor smothered an exclamation.

"Child, canst not see that my hands tremble, that I burn with fever, and am scarce master of myself?" His tone quickly changed and softened. "There, then, I will not frighten thee! Only ask me not to try my strength beyond its limit with that tale I taught thee to love and long for — "

"Then I shall go," said Varia, with no smallest understanding of his cry, and rose from the bench. But Nicanor was quicker than she. He caught her hand and turned her half around to face him.

"Nay, I 'll not let thee go!" he said unevenly. "The hour is mine, and the night is mine — and I cannot let thee go!"

She sat down once more upon the bench, passively submissive as a child to its elders' will. Nicanor dropped on one knee on the grass beside her, his arms across her lap, his hands prisoning one of hers. His deep voice lowered to a note of lingering tenderness that thrilled like the strings of a harp gently touched.

"Oh, light of all the world to me!" he said softly. "If I but dared tell thee of the thoughts that are mine, and the madness that is mine, and the punishment for them that is mine also! Wouldst understand? Ay, truly, I think so! For I 'd tell it so that the deaf trees, that whisper always and hear not — ay, and the very winds of heaven, could not help but know the meaning of my words."

She put her free hand to his face, upturned to hers, and stroked it.

"Thou poor one!" she said with gentle pity. "Is it that thou art ill to-night? Thy face burns hot, like fire. Is all well with thee?"

Nicanor suddenly bowed his head forward on her knees.

"Nay," he answered huskily. "It is not well."

She sat a moment, her hand resting idle on his rough black head.

"I am sorry!" she said then, simply. "Is there — is there aught that I could do? When my lord father is ill, he will have me sometimes to stroke his head, to ease the pain. Wilt thou that I should stroke thy head also? — Nay, do not move! See, I will touch it so, and so, and soon thou shalt be cured."

She bent over him, as he leaned against her, her soft hands slowly stroking his forehead with touch as light as the brushing of a rose-leaf. Nicanor stood it as long as he could. Then he crushed her hands in his, and kissed them passionately, many times, and rose to his feet.

"Dear little hands, that would cure all the pain and sorrow of the world an they might! They have healed me, sweet, and made me sane — ay, and wounded deeper than they healed! Go now, quickly, dear heart, while I have courage and will to say it."

"But —" she began, hesitating. He interrupted, fiercely.

"Go, child, go! Or I'll not give thee the chance again!"

"But thy head —" she persisted.

"It is cured," he answered. As she turned away,

surprised at his sudden brusqueness, he took a step beside her.

"Hast heard that thy lord father will leave Britain for Rome?" he asked abruptly.

"Leave Britain? But it is not so!" she exclaimed. "Why should he do that? He would not leave without me, and I — I will not go. I will stay here; I will not go to Rome! And thou, —" she came closer to him, — "wilt thou come to-morrow and tell me tales? Last night I waited for thee, and when thou didst not come I was lonely. Do not let me be lonely again, I pray thee!"

Nicanor looked at her for a time.

"Ay," he said finally, in a hushed voice. "I will come."

She turned from him and started across the grass. He watched her, and his hands slowly clenched. She looked back once over her shoulder, her face glimmering white in the starlit darkness. It was enough. In a stride he was after her; in a heart-beat she was in his arms, her face hidden against his breast.

"I love thee — I love thee!" he whispered hoarsely. "Heart of mine, that is the tale I dared not tell! A tale of three words, three little words, which yet is longer than any tale that ever was said or sung. Dost understand, dear heart, what that must mean to thee and me?"

She drew herself away from him with her hands against his breast.

"You love me," she repeated, not questioningly, but as one making statement of a fact. "Ay, I understand that. Why should I not?" Her voice grew tenderly

solemn. "'Where thou art, Caius, there am I, Caia; and thy people shall be my people' . . . *that* is when one loves."

Nicanor cut her short with an exclamation.

"Ay, that is when happy other men and women love!" he said bitterly. "But not for such as thou and I. For us, beloved, it means that where thou art, there I may not be; that all men, all circumstance, would strive to part us, since the world will have it that high blood may not mate with lowly."

"But why?" she asked. Her voice was wondering. "If two people love, is not that enough?"

"'If two people love,'" Nicanor repeated. He drew her back into his arms and turned her face upward to the stars and to his eyes. "Beloved, I have said I love thee with a love that must last through life and death and all that lies beyond. So, since I am what I must be, I have placed my life within thy hands for good or ill. Thou sayest 'If two people love.' Dost thou then love me?"

She raised her head and looked full at him.

"Ay, surely I love thee," she answered. "Thou hast told me tales so strange and wonderful that none were ever like them in the world before. And thou hast been kind to me, nor ever scolded, nor called me fool, as does my lord father when I have displeased him. Does not one always love those who are kind to one? It is the least that one can do, I think. And yet . . . I do not know. What is this love thou hast?"

"The most terrible thing in the world, and the sweetest," Nicanor answered, his eyes on hers. "It is a chain that binds life to life, and the links of the chain are drops

of heart's blood. It is pain from which one would not seek relief. Men have called it a flower, beloved, but it is no flower, for flowers wither in a little space, and die, and love hath eternal life. Ay, for it is eternal; and death, to it, is but a moment in the dark."

Varia caught her breath with a smothered sob.

"Ah, but I do love thee when thou talkest so!" she whispered. "Often I cannot understand thy words, but I can feel them, here, —" she clasped her hands above her heart, — "and sometimes they make me glad, and sometimes sorry, and sometimes they frighten me, and I do not at all know why. But always I long to hear more. They make me to want things I have not got, to know things I do not know, for I am very foolish. Oh, thou wizard of the silver tongue!" She raised both hands to his temples, and he could feel that her fingers shook. "Play not with me for the sake of thy sport, I pray thee! Ay, I am very foolish, — I know it, — for I may not understand how such things be; but thy speech leads me as a nurse leads her child by the hand, and I am afraid, because I cannot understand whither thou wouldst have me go."

"Play with thee! Beloved, it is no play to me," Nicanor answered. "I 'd give thee all my life and soul, as I 've given thee my heart, could I but keep from thee a moment's fear or sorrow." He bent his head and kissed her snowy eyelids. "Whatever God or gods there be that men may pray to, may they have thee, lady mine, in their holy keeping. Whoever they may be, I give thanks that this night they guarded thee — or was it the veil of thine own white innocence around thee? — for this night hath a beast been held at bay."

He let her go, and stood watching hungrily as she slipped away from him across the grass. Over the surrounding walls of the villa a faint gray mist came stealing. The song of the insects had died, and the world hung silent, awaiting the mystery of the day. The trees and bushes of the garden massed themselves into denser shadow against the tinge of ghostly light. From somewhere, far away, a cock crew, and another answered.

Nicanor listened until the faint click of a closing window reached him. Suddenly he buried his face in his hands and stood an instant motionless, a dark and sombre figure in the gray loneliness of dawn. Before the light had gathered strength for him to be more than a moving blot among the shadows, he pulled himself together with a quick shake of his shoulders, and vanished amid the tangle of vines and shrubbery that hid the little garden door.

AWNS AND PLAYERS

BOOK III

Book III

PAWNS AND PLAYERS

I

THE lord Eudemius, covered with tawny leopard skins, lay stretched on a couch of carven ebony in the library of the villa, of which the windows overlooked the great central courtyard. He was a tall man, spare, with black, sombre eyes, a high nose, and a wiry black beard, close clipped. His hands, long and white and nervous, held a scroll which he kept slowly unwinding and letting roll together again. His face was remarkable for nothing save its complete impassivity; devoid of all expression, it was merely a mask behind which the man kept locked his real self and thoughts. A dish of fruit stood on a stand at his elbow. With him in the room sat Livinius, the father of Marius, making notes with a stylus on a tablet of ivory coated with wax. The face of Livinius was grave, yet eager. He began to speak presently, as though continuing a conversation which had gone before.

"Rome has often needed gold, and has wrung it from the people mercilessly; but I tell you, Eudemius, that

her need was never greater than in this hour. Ay, and not gold alone she must have, but brains to plan for her, hands to work for her, blood to be spilled for her. You, yourself, friend, have been soldier, senator, statesman. You know, as I know, and as every Roman in his soul must know, that the core of the trouble lies in the fact that she hath gathered in more than her two hands could hold. I would not see her other than she is, — mistress of the world; but I would first see her in a position to maintain that title in the face of all challenge. And she is not in such position. Outwardly, she hath all show of might, of force invincible and impregnable. But behind this, what is there? The weakness of dissension, where there should be solidarity; division of interests, where nothing can save but union; rottenness, where there should be wholesomeness and vigor. This is not treason I speak, but truth. We have served her in field and forum, you and I; we have offered our blood on her altars; we shall both carry the marks of her service until we die. And she hath paid us well. Now I am worn out, useless, and cast aside; she has taken all she would from me, even my son. But you, old friend, have still what she needs to offer. She needs gold; but more than that, she needs one, powerful as you are powerful, to come forward and point to more timid ones the way. When she enters her own once more, she will repay your loan with interest, for that hath ever been Rome's way. I tell you, Rome in these days is like a sinking ship, from which the rats scurry in swarms, to stand aside and wait to see if there be prospect of a safe return. Here, overseas, you get but an echo of the truth. Every day the call goes out for more troops, and more."

Eudemius nodded thoughtfully.

"So the Third Legion is to be recalled from Gaul to Rome. It is what may be expected, but I had not thought so soon. Their plans have been kept well secret. Ætius will soon not have men enough for himself, not to speak of sending over men to our assistance. I suppose your son goes with them? It must be all of ten years since I saw him last."

"He hath changed," the father answered quietly. "Yes, he goes, and I go with him. Come thou with us, friend! What has Rome done to thee that thou shouldst not answer to her need? Now, if ever, is the time when her sons must rally to her, for with all her faults — and she hath many — she is still the mother of them all. I know well that it was within her walls that thy trouble fell upon thee; but was she to blame for that?"

Eudemius's dark face never changed from its graven inscrutability, but his thin hands clutched the scroll tighter and let it fall. Livinius eyed him tenderly.

"Is not the old wound healing, even yet?" he asked with great gentleness. For a moment silence fell. Then Eudemius, stooping from the couch to pick up the fallen roll, said in his hard and even voice, as though he discussed matters of small moment and everyday concern:

"Healing? Nay, how should it heal when each day fresh salt is rubbed into it? Take a look at it now, if you will, for hereafter we 'll let it bide and rankle as it must. Tell me; have not your eyes seen changes, mental as well as physical, concerning which your lips have not questioned?"

"Changes? in you?" said Livinius, dropping into the

other's more distant tone. "Ay, that is true, and my heart aches to see them. That is another reason why I urge your return to Rome. New scenes, new faces — your life is broken, yet a broken pitcher may be mended."

"True," Eudemius admitted evenly. "But who expects it to hold water again? Is it not rather placed upon the shelf and forgotten — if, indeed, it be not flung upon the rubbish-heap?"

"But think of this —" Livinius persisted. Eudemius broke in.

"Ay, I have thought of this and that, and this is all it comes to!" he said harshly. "That when I am gone, my name, blazoned in the annals of Rome before great Cæsar was, must dwindle out to nothing with a weak girl. It came to me great, unstained, heavy with memories of soldiers, heroes, statesmen, who had borne it worthily and left it clean for their sons and their sons' sons. I made it the name of wealth as well as of greatness; I thought to hand it down to my sons and my sons' sons, as the fires of Vesta are handed down from one generation to the next. A son I prayed for — what any sodden carter is judged worthy to beget; a male child to uprear in the traditions of his house, to add, an he might, his share to the glory of it. A son to serve Rome as his fathers served. And what was born to me? A puling fool, not worthy even to breed her kind into the world. Were she blessed with wit, she might mate with one worthy of her blood and keep her name thus from complete extinction. As it is — what man would have her to bear him mindless brats? Who would become sire to a race of idiots?"

Livinius scratched the wax of his tablet absently, and rubbed his finger over the mark.

"I have wondered often why you never married again," he remarked, tentatively. "It is fifteen years since Constantia's death; surely in that time you might have found a woman to become the mother of your sons."

"True, I might," Eudemius admitted, coolly. "But those fifteen years ago, through mine own folly and hatred of life after that double blow of her death and knowledge of the girl's condition, — for it was a blow, Livinius, since I was not then the wooden image of to-day, — there fell on me the judgment of the gods for such rebellion as mine." He turned his sombre eyes full on Livinius. "Would you believe, to see me as I sit here, that mine is a body racked by the tortures of the damned, drained of the very sap of life by disease that eats into every nerve and leaves it raw and quivering, yet that only numbs when its fury is spent, and will not kill? That time after time, when its throes are on me, I have turned craven and begged Claudius for a potion to end it all?" He laughed shortly, with no sound of merriment. "I marry again — a rotten hulk fit only for carrion!"

Livinius listened, shocked.

"Oh, my dear!" he exclaimed in honest sympathy, "is it indeed thus with thee? And I had thought of thee entering the harbor of thy rest, wealthy, honored, reconciled, perhaps, to what the gods in their wisdom had ordained for thee, to end thy days in quiet and content. For fifteen years, thou sayest. Man, how hast thou lived to tell it?"

Eudemius smiled, a smile which began at his lips and ended there, leaving his bitter eyes unlightened.

"Ay, fifteen years — and yet not so bad as that!" he said shortly. "Or it would have been well over with me by now. But I have known from the first what lay ahead. I won it from Claudius, — poor fool, how he trembled to tell me! — knew that each attack must be more severe than the one before; that each day the disease would stride forward a slow inch, no more, and no human skill might advance it or hold it back." His harsh voice sank a note lower. "At such times, when that grip closes upon me, I know not what I do. Rather, I know, yet am powerless to act otherwise. I tell thee, Livinius, I have had slaves flogged, ay, tortured, before my eyes, to see if by chance I might find suffering greater than mine own. And if they died, I have had tortured those who let them die, for it is not death I want, but what I have found to be worse than death. Judge then if I were not better out of the world! Yet the only way of release open to me I will not take, since I have not yet lost courage enough to brand myself a coward. I have told Claudius, on pain of death for disobedience, that no matter how I cry to him for peace, he shall pay no heed. Strange, is it not, that in this house the only happy thing is the cause of all the sorrow that hath entered it? And yet — perhaps it is not so strange. She is but the cause; on others fall the effects, . . . and in their wisdom the gods have ordered that only effects shall count in their scheme of things."

He put a hand over Livinius's hand, held it a moment, and let it go. For the first time he fell into the intimacy of the other's speech.

"Thank thee, old friend, for thy sympathy. It is not often that the gall of my bitterness overflows, for I have

learned the wisdom of the Stoic at first hand. But I can claim scant sympathy here, — and would not if I could, — where men call me the Torturer behind my back and cringe like curs before my face. I am hard and cruel and calloused to the bone; yet were I not thus, in the name of the high gods, what should I be? A thing lower than man, who can be lower than the beasts; from which gods and men — ay, and beasts themselves — would turn in loathing. Thou art my childhood's friend; thy sympathy hath been sweet to me, and I 've bared my heart to thee. I have said: 'The world runs thus and so with me; were it in my power, I 'd have it otherhow. As it is, no good will come of its discussion, so let there be an end to it, now and for all time.'"

A quick step sounded on the marble floor; the curtains at the entrance parted, and Marius came in. He went clad in spotless white, which oddly accentuated his bulk and made his swarthiness darker by contrast. He stopped short at sight of the two apparently in earnest conversation.

"Pardon!" he said easily. "I was told that I should find my father here, but I intrude."

"Not at all!" Eudemius answered. "We had finished our talk, and it was over time we were brought back from the memory of other days."

Livinius smiled at his son as the latter sat down on the wide low ledge of the window, and his genial eyes were full of pride. Eudemius caught the look, and his own eyes darkened, even though the mask of his face never changed. This indeed was a son of whom one might be proud — a son such as he himself should have had but for the mockery of the gods; a son strong of

mind and body, able to hold his own against all men, to assume the burdens that one by one slipped from his father's shoulders. There was hint of dissipation in the clear-cut face; there was more than a trace of headstrong will, which might easily enough turn to sheer brutality against whoever crossed it. There was hardness, and small tenderness, in the firm jaw and the black keen eyes; but what Roman father could not condone such things as these? For to Roman eyes, all this went to spell strength; and Romans worshipped strength as Athenians worshipped beauty. And Marius was strong, so that Eudemius, who was strong also, with the most unbreakable strength of all, and could appreciate mere physical vigor the more since his own had gone from him, looked at him and envied the father of him with bitterness.

"To-day I go on to Londinium," Marius said, gazing out into the sun-flecked courtyard. "Will you wait here, father, for me? To-morrow I shall return, or next day at most — the business will not take long." He turned to Eudemius with an explanation. "There is trouble about one of the transports which are assigned to my cohort for our return to Gaul. She has been discovered unseaworthy and in need of repairs, and may not be able to start with the rest of the fleet. This is doubly inconvenient, as there is small prospect of securing a vessel to take her place, and our orders are to sail for Gaul with as little delay as possible. So much misunderstanding and confusion has resulted, that I have been sent to report personally what are the chances for a start."

"That is too bad," Eudemius said. He was looking at Marius at the moment, and Marius was looking beyond

him into the court. Eudemius saw that all at once his face changed slightly, and his eyes awoke to a faint, curious interest. Eudemius knew that nothing in his words could have aroused this, and waited. Then he understood that Marius was watching some one outside in the courtyard; some one whose approach he could gauge by following the man's glance. The some one came to the door that opened on the court, and stopped there, and Eudemius glanced aside and saw Varia on the threshold. At the same instant Marius rose.

She wore robes that flowed and yet were clinging, of faintest green, like the young shining leaves of spring-time; and her skin glowed and her lips were crimson, and her hair was loose and tumbled. She held a ball in her hands, and stood in the doorway, hesitating, like a child who does not know whether or not it will be welcomed, and yet would like to enter and find out what was going on. In her pose there was a quaint and tender dignity, in odd contrast with her rumpled hair and the childish plaything in her hands. Eudemius looked at her; and for a single instant the veil of prejudice was lifted from his eyes, and he saw that, in spite of all, this child of his was fair, — as fair as the dear dead woman who had given her to him and lived to know what she had done. For that instant hope rose in him; he shot a glance at Marius and read the dawning admiration in his eyes; perhaps, after all, in some not too distant time, there might be — Then he realized the futility of such hopes, that had wakened and died so many times before. Marius did not know the truth. When he did know — He saw that Varia did not look at either of the others, but straight at him, and he spoke to her.

"Come hither, child!"

She came, docile, and stood near the foot of his couch. With her there seemed to enter a breath of pure fragrance, as of wind blowing softly among unspoiled, wild flowers of the country-side, of all things young and innocent and holy. Livinius's face softened as he looked at her. She waited, watching her father, expecting nothing. Always he had given her nothing to expect, neither unkindness nor affection. Eudemius looked at Livinius; from him to Marius, where he stood in the window, silent, dominant even in his silence.

"And this is mine!" he said, with a motion of his hand toward Varia. Livinius, alone understanding all that his words and tone implied, gave him a glance of mute reproach. He took Varia's hand, as she stood near him, and patted it.

"I am glad to know thee, dear child," he said gently. "Thy father I have known these many years, but thou wert a little baby when I saw thee last. Perhaps he has not told thee that I am a friend of his, and this is my son."

And Varia, for the first time, looked into Marius's face, and smiled, saying nothing at all. She sat on the edge of the couch, the ball in her lap.

"Where have you been, child?" Eudemius asked.

"In the garden, playing ball. I am going to play again," she answered, and never thought to wonder why he frowned.

But Marius came over to the couch.

"Will you let me play also?" he asked, with a faint note of amusement in his voice. "Perhaps I can show you a game you do not know, which soldiers play in

camp. When they have no ball, like yours, they take a lump of bread, that is round, and very hard, and will keep for months without spoiling, and they play with that."

Varia jumped up.

"I should like that!" she said eagerly. "I cannot show you any game, for I know none that are interesting; but I can learn yours!"

The two went out into the courtyard, side by side. Livinius said, in his gentle voice:

"She is a dear child."

And Eudemius answered:

"She is a bad bargain dearly bought," and turned his face away from the window.

Varia wearied of the new game shortly, and sat down beside the fountain to rest, with a frank intimation that her companion might go back to the house. This he showed no intention of doing, but threw himself on the grass beside her, and set himself the task of making her talk. He studied her curiously; he had seen much of many women in many lands, but none who were quite like her. Her utter simplicity was baffling; artificial himself, brought up in a civilization which was artificial, he could not get it out of his mind that it was not a pose. Very soon he got her mental calibre; with it got also certain surprises. She was all-innocent; yet, at times, when she sat with hands clasping her knees and looked past him, without speech or motion, as regardless of him as though he had not been there, he caught a hint in her eyes of something he could not read. It was as though she struggled to recall a memory of something gone by, — something sweet yet unholy which she did not understand, would not ask about, and could not forget. And,

at other times, in the midst of her childish prattle, she would say what would make him glance at her strangely, in a voice like hers, yet whose subtle intonations were not like hers. Also, he had not found many women who were at times as honestly regardless of him as though he had not been there. With all her contrarieties he found her merry, full of a primitive joy of life, touched only at moments with a haunting mystery which to his mind but added to her charm. Her laughter bubbled over as water from a spring; she was careless, thought-free, light-hearted. For it is only those who remember nothing that regret nothing; and Varia had neither remembrance nor what it brings.

When he mounted and rode for Londinium that afternoon it was with the full determination to despatch his business as quickly as might be and return. He told himself amusedly that he had been singed too often, by too many flames, to care for the feeble light of one broken lamp. This was quite true. But also he acknowledged that when other lamps were wanting, a broken one might answer for an hour.

II

THAT night the sun went down in angry crimson that ate like fire through the sullen heart of clouds banked low along the horizon. In Varia's garden the shrill insect voices were hushed; the trees drooped their leaves motionless. It was a hot and breathless night, when thunder muttered distantly and vague lightnings played hide-and-seek among the clouds, and the earth was still as an animal that crouches waiting for a blow.

Eudemius entered his room shortly before midnight, while the storm menaced and would not break. His thoughts still had their way with him, and they were none too happy thoughts. By the open window stood a tall standard of wrought bronze, from the arms of which seven lamps swung by chains, their flames flaring in the faint hot breeze which entered; otherwise the room was dark. Eudemius drew a light couch near the window and stretched himself upon it, slowly, like one worn out by weariness and pain. The lamplight fell upon his face, and showed it less of a mask, more unguarded, grim and hollow-cheeked, stamped with the seal of suffering. A slave entered, without noise, and placed on a stand a

bowl of dewy fruit, a silver pitcher of wine, and a tall cup of the exquisite Samian ware, rose-pink, thin as a fragile egg shell. In the dim light it glowed like a ruby; Eudemius glanced at it with a faint pleasure in its beauty. As the slave turned away, he spoke.

"Hath thy lady retired?"

The man stopped in the doorway.

"Lord, I know not."

"Then find out. If not, bid her come to me here."

The man, bending, crossed his arms before his face, and went. Eudemius lay and waited, watching the wan lightning at play in the lowering sky, listening to the far-off grumble of the thunder. Scents from the garden drifted to him on the warm sickly breeze; once a bat flapped past the window. His eyes grew heavy with drowsiness.

But a step close at hand aroused him. He turned his head and saw Varia coming toward him, her face pale in the dim light. She stopped when she reached the couch, and stood waiting in silence. Eudemius rose, carefully, lest he bring on a spasm of pain, and stood under the light of the seven lamps.

"Come here to me, child!" he said. Varia came, and stood where the light fell on her face and throat; and he took her by the shoulders and looked long at her. His dark eyes passed over her from brow to feet; noted the dusky warmth of her hair, where jewels gleamed like a coiled snake's eyes; the curves of cheek and throat, the ripening grace of her slim body, half-revealed beneath her silken robe. He studied her with an impersonal criticism, as though she were a statue with whose workmanship fault might be found. Had she been a statue, he could have found no fault.

"Thou art fair, child," he said musingly, while she stood passive under his hands. "Art thou fair enough to win him, handicapped as thou art? And yet, who would take thee, when there are others for the asking, as fair as thou and with none of thy defects? If thou didst but know how to use that beauty of thine, it might make less of difference. For men have wedded fools before this. Ay, but those fools must have been half woman as well as fool; but thou — thou art all fool."

He looked at her strangely; suddenly pushed aside the robe from her shoulders and laid his hands on her soft bare flesh.

"Ay, she's fair enough!" he muttered. "If I could but lash that torpid soul of hers to life — teach her what all other women in the world know by nature and instinct! For if she have the beauty of the immortal women, without the warm spirit of sex behind it, it will avail her nothing. Passionless, she can never inspire passion. To see her mated to him — his child in her arms — a son — a son! — who should redeem for me all the bitterness and the disappointment she hath brought — would not that be better than nothing?"

His hands on her shoulders shook. She glanced up at him under her lids, — a strange glance into which there flashed something that died as it came. Her eyes were dilated, but she made no motion to push his hands from her.

"Could she win him?" Eudemius's voice was not above a whisper, yet it was tense with restrained excitement. Drops of sweat beaded his forehead; the cords of his neck were taut. "Varia, dost know, child, what thou art?"

"Ay," she answered quietly. "A fool. Thou hast said it."

Eudemius gave an exclamation of bitter impatience.

"Fool — yes, and child and woman as well. Hast thou never thought what it might be to become as other women are? To know the kiss of a man's lips on thine — to feel his arms about thee — to listen to the tale of love that is told to all but thee — "

"Tale!" said Varia, catching at the word. "Oh, I have heard tales — wonderful tales, more wonderful than any that ever were told before! And I have known the kiss of a man's lips on mine; and I have felt a man's arms about me!"

Eudemius gripped her slender shoulders, staring at her, and his face worked. Then he flung her away from him.

"Thou poor fool!" he said in contemptuous pity. He clenched his hands and strode up and down before the couch. "Oh, if I could but waken thee — if I could but waken thee! I 'd use thee, poor tool as thou art — I 'd make thee, a worthless pawn, queen to play my game for me! Thou art mine, bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh, to do with as I will. Sometimes my hands itch to shake into thee the sense thou lackest — or else to shake the useless life out of thee."

He stopped before her, breathless with thwarted passion that time after time dashed itself like surge against the inexorable rock of Circumstance, to fall back baffled and beaten.

"Tell me!" he said, in a voice grown suddenly calm. "Child o' mine, dost think that thou couldst win a man?"

It was a strange question from father to child, but

then he did not see it so. And Varia, looking at him, made a strange answer.

"I have won a man!" she said, and her voice was slow and haunting. "Body and soul I have won him; he is mine for all time to come, to do with as I will. I am a fool, but I have done this thing, and I think—" She stopped, and her voice changed and grew scornful—"I think it is but a little thing to do!"

Eudemius stared at her.

"Thou hast—" he whispered, and moistened his lips with a dry tongue. "Say that again, girl! Thou hast— Is this thy raving? Nay, tell me, who is the man?"

But another mood was on Varia. She laughed, like a rippling brook.

"He hath no name!" she said merrily. "No name—nothing; for he is nothing! He comes in the clouds and in the storms and in the moonlight, and whispers strange things which none may hear but I. His voice is the wind and his words are the rustle of the leaves, and his speech is golden as flame; and oh, the tales he hath told to me!"

Eudemius laughed shortly.

"At first I even thought—" he muttered, and broke off. "Child, are thy women always with thee?"

"Ay, save at night. I sleep alone," said Varia.

Eudemius poured wine from the silver pitcher and drank it. Outside, the rain was falling with a gentle dripping. The thunder had died; the breeze, cooler, came laden with damp earthy smells. Varia went to the window and knelt beside it, leaning out into the warm darkness. Her father's eyes followed her. But if Varia's

mood had changed, his was not to be shaken off so lightly. He sat down on the couch, wiping his forehead free from sweat. Here, he was close enough to touch her, and he drew her back from the window so that she leaned against the couch and his knee.

"Varia," he said, moved by an impulse born of what had gone before, "dost love thy father?"

"Nay," said Varia, simply. "Why should I, my lord?"

"True," said Eudemius. "Why shouldst thou?"

Varia leaned her elbows on his knee, looking up at him with her chin on her hands. Her attitude held the frank fearlessness of a child.

"Does my lord father love me?" she asked, and smiled up at him. Something within him warned Eudemius to honesty.

"Nay, Varia," he said gently, and put a hand on her dark soft hair. "Thy father hath never loved thee."

Varia suddenly rested her cheek against his other hand.

"Poor father!" she murmured, as though he were somehow deserving of all sympathy for this. "Didst ever wish that I had not been born?"

"Ay," said Eudemius, still gently. "I have wished that."

Varia considered a long moment, and he knew that her eyes were on him.

"Why was I born?" she asked.

Eudemius turned his head away.

"Because thy mother loved me," he said, low and harshly.

"Because — my mother — loved thee!" Varia repeated. "Now that is strange! Did ever any one love thee?"

Eudemius started. Then he laughed.

"*Habet!*" he exclaimed, in the language of the arena when a gladiator is down; and laughed again. "Ay, child; once one loved me, and once I loved. Thou canst not credit such softness in me? Well, I do not blame thee; but it is truth."

"I believe," said Varia, "for thou hast told me truth before, to-night. If thou hadst said my father loved me, I should never have believed thy word again, but thou gavest me truth for the truth I gave to thee. I am a fool, and sometimes it is given to fools to know the truth."

"And therein to be wiser than the sane," Eudemius muttered. "And that is truth also." He looked at her a moment with something awakened in his face.

"Is there a change then, after all, in thee?" he said suddenly, deep in thought and study of her face. "Thrice to-night hast thou said what I did not understand, and never thought to hear thee say. Can it be that sometime in the future the dawn will break?"

Varia looked at him in her turn, a curious sidelong glance. In the dim light her face all at once showed strange to him, as occasionally one will see a well-known face in a new aspect — pale, with scarlet mouth and long veiled eyes. "Thou art something besides the child I've known; though whether that thing be good or evil —" His speech died; he gazed at her as though he would pierce the mystery which shrouded her and learn what it was that made her alien, forgetting to finish his words. "There is a change, and I cannot fathom it. What is

working in thee? Or is it the delusion of mine own imaginings? Thy face — thy eyes — have they changed also? Mine own imaginings — vain imaginings! What is there in thy life which could have changed thee? Ah, if but these next months might see thee still more changed!"

Varia rose from her knees beside him.

"Why should I be changed?" she asked. "And why wouldst have me changed? I am happy — I have been happy as I am. If the joy of life is not mine, as thou hast said so often, the sorrow of life is not mine either; and I do not wish to change!" Her voice grew and gathered passion. "I fear to change, for I know not what the change might bring. I do not understand. Oh, father — do not wish that I should change!"

She took a step toward him with outstretched, appealing hands. Eudemius watched her with critical eyes.

But even as he watched, his own face changed and went gray, and he caught his breath and put a hand against his side. His body stiffened and grew rigid, while at the same time long shudders ran through it, dumb protest of tortured nerves against what was in store for it and them.

"Go for Claudius!" Eudemius gasped; and Varia turned and ran. Eudemius flung himself back on the couch and lay there, striving with all his iron will to hold the convulsions in check. But he began to writhe, terribly, with no sound but the whistling of his breath through locked jaws. His hand, outflung, touched the cup that glowed like a ruby on the stand beside the couch. He clutched it, and crushed its fragile beauty

into atoms; and blood dripped with the wine upon the floor.

A torch gleamed outside the door, and hasty feet came running. Claudius, the physician, entered, very old, very small, with silver hair and beard that was like a snow-drift, followed by two slaves with lights and instruments. They lighted all the lamps, so that the room was bright as noon; and Claudius took from them what he wanted, and sent them both away. Then he rolled his sleeves above his elbows, and went to the couch where the silent figure lay twisting; and as he went he tucked his long white beard inside the collar of his gown.

III

BUT the plans of Marius did not fall out as he had intended. It was a month before he returned to the villa, with the prospect of remaining on British soil until another galley could be fitted out and commissioned. This was exasperating, and Marius fumed secretly and swore at the delay. Thinking to make the best of his enforced idleness by betaking himself to Aquæ Solis, the fashionable watering-place of Britain, and what solace he could find there, he found himself again disappointed. The leave he applied for was granted, but as he was starting upon his journey, word was brought to him that his father was ill. He found it nothing serious, but Livinius, grown querulous and childish in his fever, begged Marius not to leave him. So, perforce, Marius stayed, contenting himself with boar-hunting in Eudemius's vast parks, and being entertained by his host.

Eudemius, seemingly unchanged since his illness, had not forgotten that the young tribune's eyes had once looked with favor on his daughter. And since love, like life, is but a game, and much may be done by a player who handles his pawns wisely, Eudemius began

to conjure up hopes which, in spite of himself, he knew might never see fulfilment. The more he saw of Marius, the more he coveted his strength to prop his dying house. His fortune would be safe in Marius's hands, his name would be safe in Marius's keeping. For with all his faults Marius had a soldier's honor, and could guard what was given to his charge. Forthwith, then, Eudemius began to lay silent plans; to scheme indirectly, with cautious skill. It was a new game for him; he went about it much as one ruler who seeks alliance, for political ends, with a neighboring kingdom. He was entirely consistent in his course; no thought of his daughter's desires or wishes moved him — even no thought as to whether or not she had desires or wishes on the subject. Nor did he consider the personal inclinations of Marius himself. The alliance would mean much for him, saving only for one thing — a thing which yet might override all advantages. This was where Eudemius considered all his skill and finesse would be needed.

At first Eudemius mentioned this, the desire of his heart, to no living soul. He took Marius with him over his estates on his tours of inspection, tours become unexpectedly frequent; he took pains to have him present when overseers came with long tax-lists and rent-rolls to render account to their lord. Marius saw himself surrounded with every luxury art could devise and skill could execute, not as though brought forth for some occasion, but quite plainly in everyday use and service. Life, eased for him from all exertion by the unseen hands of many slaves, became a dream of indolence and content. Horses, grooms, slaves, were at his disposal; no wish of his, however lightly uttered, but was

unostentatiously fulfilled. In the midst of all this he was left with no sense that it was done with a view to impress upon him the magnificence of the villa and the villa's lord. He took it as he was intended to take it, and as it was, as a matter of course, since all his life he had been accustomed to wealth and the luxury it might bring. And, being so accustomed, he was able to appreciate justly the amount of money it must take to maintain such an establishment in such a style. He listened to the reports of overseers and stewards, all unaware that he was meant to do so; by degrees his own and his father's fortunes came to seem by contrast mean and small. He fell readily enough into ways which, reasonable for Eudemius, were extravagant for him. But, in spite of his inclinations toward the life sybaritic, it was plain that he had no intention of getting himself in debt to Eudemius in any shape or form. When Eudemius judged the time to be ripe, he brought Varia upon the scene. This he did after his own fashion, studying carefully each effect that she should make, with an artist's eye and a mind that would stop at no subterfuge to gain its end.

Livinius was convalescent, though still weak and unable to leave his bed, when Eudemius went upon a day to his apartments and was admitted. Livinius lay in bed, looking gentler and frailer than of old, with a slave reading to him from the *De ira* of Seneca. He signed to the latter to leave, and held out a hand to his friend.

"Sit by me here, if you will," he said. "I have much to ask, and, I doubt not, you to tell. That worthy physician of yours is dumb as any oyster. Were it not for my boy bringing me scraps of news now and again, I should indeed feel out of touch with the world."

Eudemius seated himself beside the bed, his back, as usual, to the light.

"The world wags to its own appointed end," he said carelessly. "Have you heard, then, that Rome has again refused to send troops to our aid? Verily, Britain is left to struggle with her independence like a dog with a bone too large for it. There is but a sorry time in store for us, if present indications point aright. You have asked me often to go back with you to Rome, and I have been long considering it. But Rome has twenty strong men where Britain has one, and I think that my place is here. To my mind, the people of the land, seeing those in power withdrawing, and not knowing what to do of themselves, will turn like sheep to any who will stand by them. Why, man, if one played his game with skill in this coming crisis, and kept from joining in the panic into which others have flung themselves headlong, he might make his power here little short of absolute, and reap his reward when Rome has settled her affairs and the storm has blown over. One might become a second Carausius, another Constantine. Already, since the troops of Ætius have gone, folk believe they hear that endless storm muttering again in the West and South, and tell tales of new invasions of Jutes and Saxons. It is a fact also that merchants going north require a double bonus on the goods they take. What Britain will do without the hand to hold to which has led her for so long, is a question which no man can answer and all men ask. But these be weighty topics to concern a sick-room, and I have other matters to discuss with thee."

Livinius turned inquiring eyes upon him, but Eudemius was staring past him, thoughtfully.

"A matter which touches me nearly," he said, and all at once dropped into a more familiar mode of speech. "Thou art my oldest friend, and there is none to whom I would sooner speak in confidence. Thou knowest that I am growing old. Soon the gods of the shades will lay their hands upon mine eyes, and my daughter and my house will be left alone. And a heavy time of trial it will be for her, incompetent, with the burden of my wealth upon her. Were it not for this, I could willingly leave all this; but some one first I must find to charge himself with that burden for the recompense it may bring him. And there is but one way to do this; I must mate her to some worthy man. If he be in humble circumstances, her gold shall alter that; if he be great, it shall make him greater. To take her with it would be, after all, but a little thing, since she is too much a child to want more than is given her, and is content with little. With her unmated, as she is, fancy what would follow were she alone. No — it needs a strong hand to guard what I have guarded; but it is a task well worth the taking. And it is in my mind that I have found that strong hand I seek — if so it be that the owner thereof is willing."

He paused, to see that the sick man's eyes were on him in quickened interest.

"That man, friend," Eudemius said slowly, "is thy son. Him I would have, and none other, to reign in my stead and take the place of that son denied me, who was to rear his children in the traditions of my house and his. What say you to this, friend, if it chances that Marius himself is willing?"

For a moment there was a pause. Livinius lay back

on his pillows, and his face was a battleground of contending thought. Plainly it said: "Power is great, but gold is greater, since it can purchase power; therefore gold is a good thing to have. Yet no bargain was ever offered without a 'but,' and what goes with this bargain of thine, O friend? An incubus which a man might well hesitate to let fasten upon him; a hindrance to himself and, it may be, a menace to generations yet unborn. And yet, the prize is worth risking much for, and the temptation is great."

At this point came wavering, uncertainty, a look of greed, cautious and eager. Eudemius, watching, let the battle wage itself. When Livinius finally spoke, it was slowly, weighing his words with care.

"You have spoken with all the frankness one friend could wish from another. It is only meet that I too should be as frank. If my words offend, remember that it is I who shall grieve most. Your daughter, fair though she is, and lovely, is yet a child, despite her years, — a child who needs the care and thought which only love can give. Needing all, she could give nothing save herself to her husband; and man's needs are of the spirit as well as of the flesh. And suppose he wanted not the gift; what would there be for him? You see, I set aside all mention of her dower; for though a man may marry gold, he must marry the woman also. I have watched Marius from his cradle; I have marked when his nature followed the lines along which I strove to train it, and when it turned of itself into new channels of its own. And of these channels, some, I confess, ran widely counter to those which I had planned. No parent ever saw a child grow precisely to the measure of the ideal

of which he dreamed; it may be that every father under the sun is doomed to disappointment at some trait or other in the child of his flesh."

Eudemius looked away from him, nodding soberly.

"So it hath been with me," said Livinius. "Marius has been a good son; but a good man he has not been. For a bad man may make a good son, even though a bad son never makes a good man. But I am not blind, and year by year have I watched the changes in him, some for the better, some for the worse. When he was a child I chastised; when he was a youth I counselled; when he became a man I could do no more than stand aside and watch him start upon the road he had marked out for himself. And I tell you, Eudemius, — and you may guess if the words come easily, — that were I in your place I would not give my daughter, being what she is, to such a man as he. For her sake as well as his I say this. He is my son, and my house is his home for so long as he wills it, and what I have is his. But to your daughter, young, innocent, knowing nothing of the world, and less than nothing of men, he would bring only unhappiness and woe. She could not understand him; he would be at no pains to understand her. Whether love might raise him to its own height, I dare not say; rather I fear that he would lower it to him. He is passionate, yet cold; but he is strong, and to men he is loyal and a lasting friend. He is a soldier through and through; no mistress, were she never so madly loved, could come before his sword. For to him, arms mean ambition and the fame he has set himself to gain; love is a dalliance by the way, pleasant for the hour, soon forgotten. Sorry sport for a wife, you see! There you have him, as I, his father,

know him. And how can I, his father, say these things of him, who should stand with him against all the world? Because he needs not my help to win his battles; and there is one who in my mind may need it sorely."

And again there was a silence. Eudemius rose.

"Thank thee, friend," he said. "Thy words have made me to hunger all the more for that son of thine. Mine also he shall be, if I can compass it. What need he give her but a name? — and that, in good sooth, it will not hurt him to bestow."

He turned on his heel and went away; and Livinius looked after him long and gravely.

When Marius entered, some time later, it was to find his father alone and in deep thought. Marius inquired how he had been feeling that day, and if he thought his strength returning. Livinius answered abstractedly. He was aware that Eudemius's plan was taking root in his mind; coming to weigh its pros and cons, he found that after all it might not be such a bad thing for Marius — and himself. He motioned Marius to seat himself. Marius obeyed, waiting for what his father might have to say. But Livinius kept his abstracted silence, and presently Marius himself spoke.

"Will Eudemius return with you to Rome?"

Livinius shook his head thoughtfully.

"I fear not. I have tried to persuade him, but — I think his plans lie here. For one thing, he does not like the idea of going back with that daughter of his."

Marius turned a slow glance on his father.

"It is a pity about that girl," he said indifferently. "She is very fair — as fair as any of Rome's beauties."

"And as wealthy. When her father hath undergone

his fate, his estates will pass to her," said Livinius. He did not look at his son, and his voice was careless.

"It is a pity," Marius repeated, noncommittally. Livinius put his own construction upon the words.

"You mean — her misfortune? Ay, true. But many a man would overlook even that for sake of the gold she would bring him."

"And that is true also," Marius said. "And yet — it were a risky thing for a man to give his sons a mother found so wanting."

So that Livinius knew that Marius's thoughts, like his own, had strayed into those paths wherein Eudemius would lead them. He changed the subject then, speaking of the delayed transport and affairs in Gaul. Then he became weary, being still weak, and Marius left him.

The next evening, Marius, returning from hunting to the villa just before dusk, unwontedly thoughtful over prospects which his mind was beginning to conjure up, to look at, and play with, as it were, was met by a slave who said that the Lady Varia sent word that she wished to see him on his return. Somewhat surprised at this, for he had scarcely seen her, much less spoken with her, since his arrival from Londinium, he followed the man to the door of her apartments. Here he passed a second slave, a tall fellow with a shock of black, unkempt hair, who was trimming a lamp near by. This one turned his head to watch him as he entered, with fierce wolf eyes into which leaped sudden jealous distrust. But a slave was a slave to Marius; and so heedless was he of the man's presence, that later he could not have told whether or not he had been there.

Just inside the door Marius's guide crossed his arms

before his face, bending low, and left him, as though at an order. Marius, again surprised at this, stood and waited. The room, lofty and warm and floored with exquisite tiling, seemed to overlook a garden, where dusk was gathering fast. It was furnished sumptuously, and was filled with flowers which stood in great jars of gorgeous Eastern coloring. Halfway down its centre ran one of the dwarf walls so common in Roman rooms, which was made to serve as the back of a low and cushioned couch on either side of it. A lamp of wrought bronze stood near, and by its light Marius saw that a figure was lying on the couch, with head thrown back against the cushions and one white arm hanging over the side.

"Lady Varia?" Marius exclaimed. She did not answer, and he saw that she seemed asleep. He went to the couch, walking softly, with a faint wonder as to why she had sent for him. She lay with long lashes sweeping her cheeks and her warm lips parted, in the careless abandon of a child, infinitely graceful, full of allurement. The thought entered his mind that it was a pose, a piece of pretty trickery. He bent down until his lips all but touched her cheek and the perfume of her hair rose to him, so that had she been feigning she must have given sign, or else been better skilled in the gentle art of flirting than he believed. But she slept on, unconscious, with slow, regular breathing, so still that he could see the beat of her heart under the filmy stuff of her tunic.

And even as he watched her, so another, unseen, watched him, — another with gaunt, haggard face and calculating eyes that took in every move of his pawns in the game to which he had set them. With his father's

words, in which he had read the hint, clear in his mind, Marius stood looking long at the sleeping girl. Patrician she was from the crown of her dusky head to the tip of her jewelled sandal. Fair she was, — and his breath came shorter as his gaze wandered unchecked over her, — eminently desirable, and yet — He found himself confronted by the unavoidable fact of her affliction. A man might well hesitate in face of all that it could mean. One could not tell — that was the trouble. He realized, all at once, that her eyes were open, and that she was looking at him, without speech or motion. He drew back, with a certain wholly unconscious veiling of expression, and spoke.

"You sent for me, Lady Varia?"

She raised herself on an elbow, pushing the hair out of her eyes to look up at him. With the motion, the jewelled fibula which held her tunic at the shoulder became unfastened, letting the drapery slip lower over snowy neck and arm. He noticed that if she saw this, she made no effort to replace it.

"Sent for you? Not I!" she said, and tapped her fingers on her lips to stifle a yawn. "Or if I did, I have forgotten. Why should I have sent for you?"

She let herself sink back in the cushions, and he pulled a seat near the couch and sat down. She began to play idly with the coiled golden snake around her bare arm, looking down at it with long sleepy eyes. Again, as once before, the novelty of this lack of attention piqued him into a passing interest.

"If I disturb you, I will go away," he offered. "You were sleeping; it were pity to disturb such sweet repose."

"You do not disturb me," she answered, with all calmness, not looking at him. "Why should you? If you like to stay, you may. I am not asleep now."

"Did you have pleasant dreams?" Marius asked, as he might have asked it of a child. She turned scornful eyes on him.

"I do not dream asleep!" she said. "Only when I wake. What are dreams but thoughts, and how can one think, asleep?"

He looked at her, surprised. She relapsed into silence, unwound the snake from her arm, at length, and took to turning it over and over in her fingers, letting the light play on its emerald eyes and the rich chasing of its scales. He continued to watch her, with greater freedom under her entire indifference. He felt that, if he should get up and leave her, she would take no notice, but lie there just the same, drowsy-eyed and indifferent, turning and turning the golden snake. This slipped from her fingers after a time and dropped to the floor at his feet. He picked it up, and as she held out her hand to receive it back, he clasped her wrist gently and began to coil the snake about her arm, above the elbow. She let him do it; emboldened, he kept her hand, when the jewel was in place, and pressed it gently. But she drew it away, not as though in rebuke, however, and examined the armlet to see that it was on properly.

"Is it not right?" Marius asked, amused. "Let me do it again; this time I will make sure."

She shook her head, with a slow smile at him. Greatly daring, he leaned nearer, and fastened the loosened pin on her shoulder. In the operation, his fingers touched her soft flesh. But she seemed not to notice

him at all; so that quite suddenly he felt baffled and perplexed.

"You are a strange girl!" he said abruptly. Again she smiled.

"Why?" she asked. "Because you cannot understand me, you call me strange?"

He laughed.

"Perhaps that is it, O my Lady Wisdom. But truly I begin to think you a riddle worth the reading. It may be, that with somewhat of teaching, you might prove a pupil apt enough for any man."

She looked at him eagerly.

"Is it a game?" she asked. "You taught me one before, and I liked it. Wilt teach me also this other game? Is it a good game?"

"Ay," said Marius, amusement in his voice. "It is a good game — the finest game in the world, for the one who wins. And, indeed, I have it in mind to teach thee, thou pretty witch, the more so since I should have the methods of no other to unteach. See, then, I 'll show thee the first move. Give me thy hand — so."

Varia held out her hand, leaning back on her pillows with eager eyes of anticipation. Marius took the hand. It was small and soft and fragrant, with rosy, polished nails.

"This, you must know, is a game at which but two can properly play," he explained, as a schoolmaster might propound theories to a class. "Three have sometimes tried it, but the third in most cases has wished he had kept away. Most players divide it into three parts, for the sake of convenience. The first, for the woman; the second, for the man; the third, usually, for the lawyers.

This latter may be played in various ways — sometimes is omitted altogether. A great advantage of this game is that so many rules govern it, that whatever one does, is in accordance with some rules, even though it may be at variance with certain others."

He turned the little hand over and kissed the palm.

"Certain things there be which every player should possess," he added in the same tone. "For the woman, beauty — or if not this, a cleverness which is clever enough to manifest itself only in results. Also, if a woman hath not beauty, it is imperative that she be an adept at the game. Innocence, in one party, not in both, is a valuable asset, since one of the objects of the game is the winning of it. Were both to have it, it would become in very truth a child's game. Wealth is also a good thing to have, — and this for both players, — since one or both are apt to pay dearly in the end. And wealth is also nearly always an object in the game. It hath many points, you see, which must be remembered."

"I fear it is a hard game," said Varia, and shook her head in doubt. "I — I cannot remember things very well sometimes."

"Even that hath been found an advantage at times," said Marius, and laughed softly. He changed his place and sat on the edge of the couch beside her, and possessed himself of her other hand. Varia glanced from her prisoned fingers to his face and back again.

"The game may be played fast, or it may be played slowly," said Marius, his eyes on her perplexed face. "In most cases, the faster the better, lest one or other of the players should tire. What say you, sweetheart — shall ours be short and therefore merrier?"

He drew her back into his arms, and raised her face with his free hand and kissed her lips.

"No!" said Varia, quickly, and struggled slightly to sit up.

"Yes — that is in the game!" said Marius, and would not let her go. "Does it come hard at first, my sweet? Never mind — soon you will like it better. Besides, I have told you that it is part of the game. So — rest quiet, and I will show you how else it goes."

In her eyes he read a struggle to recall something gone before and all but forgotten; a mental groping, painful in its intensity. She ceased her resistance, and he drew her closer and kissed her many times, with a growing passion which surprised himself. Her breath came quicker, but in her eyes was only the dumb striving after things forgotten, with no fear at all nor anger with him. His lips strayed where they would; in her strange absorption she seemed scarcely conscious of him.

"Truly I did well to call thee strange!" Marius said low in her ear. "Did one not know the facts of the case he might well count thee as good a player as himself."

Varia wrenched her hands from his and sat up. So swift was her motion that he had let her go before he knew it. She put her hands to her temples.

"But I have played this game before!" she cried, unheeding him. "I know now — oh, I know now! Thou wilt tell me that I am beautiful, and that thou lovest me, and thou wilt say that all is not well with thee for the pain thou hast. And I will stroke thy head to ease the pain, as sometimes my lord father will have me do. That is how the game goes. And Marcus comes and tries to play as he came before; he was the third, as

thou hast told, who wished that he had not. But it should be in the garden; it was in the garden before!"

"Now what is this raving?" Marius exclaimed, wholly uncomprehending. He tried to take her again, but she slid off the couch and escaped him. He pursued and caught her, but instead of the passive yielding he expected, he met resistance which was unlooked-for.

"No! I'll have no more!" she cried. "Let me go — I do not wish to play this game with thee! Always he stops when I bid him — thou must do the same. I do not like this thy way. He is not rough, but gentle, and I do not fear him. Oh, let me go!"

"Thou hast played this game before, then?" said Marius. "Be still, girl! I'll not hurt thee, but I will not let thee go. Is there more in this than I had fancied? Are thy words mere idle raving? By the gods, I think not! Answer me what questions I shall ask, and I'll let thee go, not sooner. I have a mind to know the truth of this!"

She stood still, half in tears, breathing fast, like a frightened child.

"Hast thou played this game before?" Marius asked.

"Ay," she murmured, like a child brought to task, and tried again to release herself as though to escape punishment.

"With a man didst thou play it?"

"Ay, with a man."

"What man?"

She ceased her futile efforts to escape, and wrung her hands helplessly.

"I will not tell! He said that if my lord father knew it he would be displeased!" she wept.

"I think it likely that he would," said Marius, grimly. "But to tell me would not be telling him. It may be that I can help thee. There, never cry like that! Am I not thy friend?"

"I know not!" she sobbed. "Oh, I am frightened! Let me go, I pray thee!"

"Tell me first!" Marius persisted. He cast a hasty glance around. "Quick, for we shall not be alone much longer. Tell me, I say!"

She only wept, her face hidden in her hands. Marius's temper, a fragile thing at best, gave way.

"Never think to keep it from me! I 'll have it whether thou wilt or no," he said roughly. The idea of an intruder upon what he had suddenly come to consider his own domain was not to be tolerated. Varia again struggled, with violence, and finding herself held fast, screamed loudly.

"Hush, little fool!" Marius exclaimed. "I am not hurting thee!"

"Let the girl go, lord!" said a voice behind them. Marius turned his head, to see a figure bearing down upon them, lean and tall, with a shock of black hair and angry eyes. Varia, turning at the same instant in Marius's grasp, saw the man, and cried:

"Make him to let me go! He hath tried to make me tell thy name — do not thou tell it!"

"So!" Marius exclaimed in triumph, catching the clew. "Thou art the man — thou!" His tone held wrath and amazed disgust.

The slave stood his ground.

"Let the girl go!" he repeated. It might well have been that never had a man used such a tone to Marius

in his life before. From a slave it was not to be brooked.

"Get you gone, you dog!" he said savagely. "Later I 'll settle with you, if it be that my suspicions be correct. How dare you enter here unbidden?"

"I heard my lady cry out," Nicanor answered. Varia's voice broke into his speech.

"I tell thee make him to let me go! He is a beast, and I hate him — I hate him!"

Rather than prolong the scene before a slave, Marius let her go. She ran to Nicanor and caught his arm.

"Take me away!" she cried through tears. "I will not stay with him!"

"It were best that you should go," Marius agreed promptly. "As for you, fellow —"

"He shall come with me!" Varia said imperiously. "You will harm him — I will not have him stay. Go yourself, bad man!"

"There will be no harm done, my lady," Nicanor said gently. There was all possible respect in his voice, but Varia went, obedient, with a last look backward on the threshold. Marius turned upon Nicanor.

"Now, who are you?" he asked curtly.

"You see me — a slave," Nicanor made reply. His voice was sullen; he was cornered, and he knew it. Also he was powerless, unable to strike a blow in his own defence; and who would see that justice was done a slave?

Marius sat down on the couch and eyed him. Nicanor returned his gaze with watchful eyes alert for any move.

"I have seen your face before!" Marius said suddenly, awaking to a consciousness of the fact. Nicanor

answered nothing. The two eyed one another in silence, neither yielding an inch, the Roman coldly haughty, the slave always watchful.

"Hast ever held communication with the Lady Varia?" Marius asked.

"I have served her," Nicanor answered.

Marius laughed, looking him up and down as though he had been a horse put up for sale.

"So I begin to think!" he muttered. "After what fashion, dog?"

Nicanor's eyes blazed beneath their shaggy brows; his brown hands clenched in fury.

"As a servant should," he said harshly.

Again Marius laughed.

"So! That drew blood, did it? What has passed between you? Have you, you base-born clod, dared draw her attention to you, and she a noble's daughter? Speak, you fool, if you would not die the death!"

Nicanor raised his head slowly and looked his questioner in the eyes, a defiance as direct as insolent bravado could make it. Marius's thin lips drew tighter.

"You refuse to answer, do you? Do you know that for this you will be broken on the rack at the lifting of my finger? And if you refuse to speak, this shall be done before another day is past. You have a chance now which you will not have again, to deny or to confess. And it is not every one who would give it!"

"My lord hath not questioned me. To no other am I accountable," said Nicanor.

Marius grunted scornfully.

"You fool! Do you think your silence can save you? I'll have the story from Lady Varia; how may she

withhold it? Her own lips shall seal your guilt, as already they have convicted you."

This was true. Nicanor knew it, but he did not flinch. All that was left to him was to die game, and this he knew also.

Marius all at once wearied of his examination.

"Be off with you!" he ordered insolently. "I'll have you cringing yet before I am through with you."

Nicanor turned on his heel, with no obeisance such as a slave should make, and strode out of the room. Marius gave a short, angry laugh.

"The brute will not whine! By all the Furies, he's worth the breaking. Now, methinks, I have my scornful lady where I want her — and my lord as well. This slave may be a weapon worth the having, since my foot is on his neck also. We shall soon see!"

IV

THAT night Eudemius and his younger guest supped alone, with but one slave to wait upon them. Marius, never prone to speech, kept his own counsel as to the events of the afternoon, and bided the time when he might turn them to his own ends. Eudemius also was more silent than his position as host seemed to warrant. That he was in bad humor was to be seen from the threatening glances he cast at the luckless slave when a dish was delayed or a wine too warm. He was an old man, this latter, white-haired and bent and very skilful, with a sunken face as pale as parchment. Marius, as keen to observe as he was silent, saw that always the old man watched his lord's face with an eager anxiety, like a dog that would read every thought in its master's eyes.

Eudemius, as was his custom, took only fruit and one of the light Cyprus wines. Marius, not at all disturbed by his host's example, dined luxuriously and drank freely. Wine had small effect on him; but he noticed that each time his glass was filled Eudemius glanced at him, with apparent carelessness. This amused him,

and, sure of himself, out of sheer perversity, he took care to have it replenished many times.

Halfway through the meal, Eudemius clapped his hands.

"Marcus, come hither!" he said shortly. Marcus came, with servile submission. "Go to Nerissa, and bid her bring her mistress here. She will know what to do."

The old man hesitated a bare instant, with a strange glance at his lord, crossed his arms, and went.

"Marius." Marius's keen wits, instantly at work upon the name and the half-forgotten idea it conjured up, found the thread they sought. "Marcus came once and tried to play; he was the third," Varia had said. Marius's eyes lightened to a secret satisfaction. Here was one, at his hand, who could supply the information he wanted. He leaned forward across the table.

"To-day I had speech with thy daughter," he said, as one introducing a topic which may prove of interest. Eudemius turned his inscrutable eyes on him.

"So?" he said calmly.

"She told me a wondrous tale of a man who came to her in a garden," said Marius; and watched suspicion grow into the other's eyes and burn there. "She said it was a game they played — what game, thou and I may guess. I put it down to the — fancies she hath at times, and paid no heed. But when she said that one Marcus had seen this man there also, it came to me that perhaps there might be more in it than might be thought. If this be the Marcus of whom she spoke, it may be that he would have something to tell. — Try these roasted snails, I pray thee; they are beyond praise. It would seem that they are delicate enough — "

"She herself hath said—" Eudemius began, and stopped. The mask of his face never changed; only his mouth settled into sterner lines and his eyes grew more forbidding. Silence fell between the two and lasted until Marcus came in again and held the curtains apart for Varia. She entered quickly, her bosom heaving, lips pouting, eyes full of tears.

"Nerissa would have it that I should wear this dress, and I hate it!" she cried petulantly, before either man could speak. "She said that thou didst will it so. Wherefore? I will not wear it ever again. I scolded her until she wept, but she made me wear it."

"She was right. I gave command to her," Eudemius said coldly. "Sit there."

Varia dropped into the seat opposite Marius, with a resentful glance at her father and a wrathful twitch of the hated robe. It was of faintest amethyst, with tunic embroidered in gold, fastened by many jewels. She looked like a fair young princess, a very angry young princess; and Marius, from where he reclined at ease on the opposite side of the table, looked across at her with quite evident admiration.

"Why should you hate it, if unworthy man may ask?" he said amusedly. "Surely not because you think it makes you less fair, since nothing could do that. Why, then?"

"Because I do!" she flashed at him, as though that settled the matter. Marius bowed in mock humility.

"The best reason of all!" he said gallantly.

"Child, with whom didst thou play thy game in the garden?" Eudemius asked. His voice was gentler than his face, and quite casual. Varia fell into the trap. She looked up eagerly.

"It was a game —" she began, and stopped, with the red blood flushing into her face and her eyes turning from her father to Marius. "I do not remember!" she stammered.

Eudemius turned his sombre eyes full on her, and she shrank and trembled.

"Thou dost not remember?" Eudemius said in his even, inexorable voice. "But there was a game? Was it a game in which a man held thee in his arms and kissed thee?"

She nodded quickly.

"Ay, a game," she exclaimed, and caught herself up. "No, no!" she cried fearfully. "It was no game — Oh, I do not know! I cannot remember!"

She hid her face in her hands and wept. Eudemius motioned to the silent slave behind her chair.

"Take her to her nurse and return," he said. "I 'll have the truth of this by some means."

Marcus led his weeping mistress away; and Eudemius saw that Marius's eyes followed her until the curtains fell behind her, and read the look therein.

With her exit, Eudemius all at once lost his composure. He sprang from his place at the table and took to striding up and down the room. Unexpectedly he stopped before Marius.

"If there be truth in this," he said, and his voice shook with rising fury, "I 'll find the man who hath entered my gates by night, and for what damage he has wrought I will make him pay tenfold with living flesh and blood. Marcus was there, thou sayest; he will know. And if he will not tell — if he thinks to shield him —"

He broke off with a quick intake of breath, and put

a hand to his side. A spasm of pain crossed his pale face and distorted it. "Come back, thou knave, while I have sense to question!" he muttered, and dropped into the nearest seat, and sat there, with head bent forward and hands clutching claw-like the arms of the chair.

Marcus entered, alone. Eudemius raised his head.

"Didst thou—" he began, and stopped. But he gathered himself together, and tried again.

"Didst thou see him who entered the women's place by stealth to hold speech with thy mistress?"

Marcus nodded eagerly. His voice was drowned in Eudemius's exclamation of fury.

"So the fool spake truth when I thought she raved! Not so much fool after all, perhaps, but better fool than—" He checked himself on the word. "Who is the man?" Again his face grew distorted; on the hands that gripped his chair the veins stood out dark and swollen. Pain made him brutal; he glared at Marcus with the blood-shot eyes of a goaded beast. Marcus, with a hoarse cry, bowed himself to the ground, his hands before his face. Eudemius brought his fist down on the arm of his chair.

"Who is the man? Answer, slave, if thou wouldst keep the flesh on thy living bones! Who is the man, and what hath been his work?"

Then Marcus raised himself, with outstretched hands, gesticulating frantically. The effort he made to speak was fearful; his face became congested, his eyes seemed starting from his head. And his voice was as fearful, hoarse, bestial, with apish gibberings. But no words came; he could only beat the air and cry out in impotent despair.

"The man is mad!" Marius exclaimed, staring.

Eudemius lifted himself half out of his chair. Beads of sweat stood thick upon his forehead.

"Mad or sane, I'll have the truth from him!" he snarled. He caught the dog-whip from the back of his chair and lashed the slave across the face.

"Now speak!" he shouted. "Think not to shield him so, for I'll have thee flayed alive before thou shalt defy me thus!"

"I — I!" groaned Marcus. The word had a strange and guttural sound, but Eudemius did not notice.

"Go on!" he ordered furiously.

"I — I —!" Marcus screamed, and fell grovelling at his master's feet.

A spasm of pain shook Eudemius and turned him livid. He kicked savagely at the writhing figure on the floor and clapped his hands thrice loudly. Two slaves came running, with faces pale with apprehension. Eudemius, almost beyond speech himself, raised a shaking hand and pointed downward at the heap.

"Take him to the stone room and put him to the rack until he is ready to say what I would hear!" he said hoarsely. His voice broke into a gasp; he leaned back heavily, with his other hand against the chair from which he had risen. "When he is ready, call me!"

The men lifted Marcus to his feet and took him away.

Marius watched interestedly. To counsel mercy never crossed his mind — the mind of a Roman bred to consider bloodshed a sport and mortal strife a pastime. If Eudemius chose to kill his slave for a whim — well, the slave was his, and it was nobody else's business. He turned to the table and poured himself another glass of wine.

Eudemius dropped back heavily into the chair and sat, as before, with head bent slightly forward and gripping hands. And, as before, he seemed listening; only this time it was with a cruel and eager greed, and his eyes, bloodshot and terrible, were as the red eyes of a vulture that waits for its victim's death. From time to time his mouth twitched, and a shudder, long and uncontrollable, ran through him.

But still he waited, and there was silence in the room.

V

THAT day Nicanor had been assigned by Hito to the squad of the fire slaves, whose duty it was to tend the fires of the hypocausts which warmed the guest apartments, the rooms of the master's family, the banquet halls, and the baths. The great fireplaces, one for every hypocaust, built in arches under the outer walls of the villa, were approached from the outside by passages of rough masonry. From them the hot air was carried back through the hypocaust and led to the rooms above by means of an ingenious system of flue tiles. The fires, burning constantly from the first approach of the keen weather of Autumn, needed incessant attention. All day slaves went back and forth, carrying wood and buckets of mineral coal from the great mines near Uriconium, through the narrow alleys to the roaring furnaces, where the air, smoke-laden and acrid, was hot to suffocation. Here, panting, dripping with sweat, they fed the flaming mouths; then back again into the outer air, which by contrast struck knife-like to the very vitals. The colder the weather and the greater the necessity for fires, the more was the suffering of the slaves increased. The

feeding and attendant cleaning of the furnaces was a task given usually either to none but the lowest menials or else as punishment. Hence Nicanor knew himself in Hito's black books, and obeyed his orders with an ill grace which did not tend to lighten his labors.

Once that day already he had shirked his duty, driven by restless longing, to stand outside the door which for him hid all the enchantment of the world, until the coming of Marius had sent him about any task he could lay hand to. With what had followed, and with the knowledge that his fate was absolutely in the hands of Marius, he became impatient at the delay. The sword hung above him and would not fall. If he but knew what was to happen he fancied that he might have prepared himself in a measure to meet it. Nothing in the way of escape could be attempted until after nightfall; he was too much the object of Hito's malicious attention for that. And escape meant escape from Varia, from stolen, memory-haunting visits, from all that just then made life bearable. Suspense and his own powerlessness turned him sullen; he went about his tasks under Hito's eye with a dogged surliness at which his fellow-slaves laughed in private and dared not challenge him in good-natured raillery.

Away from Hito, he straightway forgot what was in his hands, and remained deep in boding thought, his face lowering. He was on the edge of a precipice into whose depths no man dared look; into which Marius's hands might plunge him at will. Thoughts of Thorney, of the churned-up waters of the fords, of the camp-fires glowing through dusk, of the nervous press of men and beasts that lit upon the island like a swarm of bees, and,

like a swarm, buzzed awhile and settled to brief rest, crowded upon him then. He would go back to Thorney — though never to the ivory workshop — and he would make enough to live on by telling tales to those who circled about the fires, even though these were not the worlds he had dreamed of conquering. And first of all, and somehow, he must free himself from the welded collar of brass about his throat. With this to brand him for what he was, the first man he met along the highway might return him to his master — if he could — and claim reward.

The slaves' quarters, following the general plan of the house, were built around a square inner court, with a cryptoporticus, or covered gallery, at the northern and southern ends. But here were no polished floors of rich design and coloring; no soft couches and brilliant draperies, no marbles and paintings. There were no hypocausts beneath to warm the rooms to Summer heat; these, small and bare as cells, were always cold. On the eastern side of the court were housed the women slaves; on the western, the men. Between these, on the northern end, were the apartments of the freedmen and stewards and overseers, with their offices. On the southern side, to the right of the main entrance to the court, were the storerooms leading down to the dark coldness of the wine-cellars. To the left of the entrance were the kitchens, with stoves, and with hypocausts beneath them. Outside the walls, singly and in groups, were the wattled huts of the field-hands, who cared for the parks and immediate lands of the villa, and who came twice daily to the great house to be fed.

In such a household, where economy was a lost word

and extravagance the order of life, the stewards and overseers who managed it, being accountable only to their lord, were vested with much power, and made the most of it. Head and front of them all was Hito, fat and shining, with glinting pig's eyes. No detail of the great establishment was too trivial for his notice. Supposed to have general control over each division of slaves, which in turn was managed by its own headman, he yet had a finger in all businesses. Like all men of his stamp, he went in mortal fear of ridicule; thought to show his power by abuse of it. On his word alone a slave might be put to the rack; let an unfortunate incur his displeasure, and he had endless ways of revenge. His predominating characteristic was an oily sleekness; the very voice of him was smooth with unctuousness. Violent likes and dislikes he took, and was in a position to gratify both, a bad enemy and a worse friend. And his methods had but one trait in common, — an entire and often apparently irrational unexpectedness. It was the one thing which in him might be relied on; he would do the thing he was least expected to do.

After the evening meal came a period of respite for those not on duty at the house. Much license was carried on at such times, at which Hito discreetly winked — unless he held a grudge against some luckless one. Even he had been known to take a hand himself in various affairs, using his official authority to gain his private ends.

Dusk deepened, and night fell. Hito rolled to the door of his office and stood looking out into the court, picking his teeth with grunts of well-fed content. A slave was lighting a brazier of charcoal near the well in

the centre of the court. The bit of blazing tinder, which he nursed carefully between his hands, threw its light up into his face and showed it in relief against the darkness, sombre, strongly marked, with a thatch of black bushy hair. Hito, recognizing him, scowled with an instantly aroused antagonism.

"Nicanor!" he shouted.

Nicanor lifted the brazier by its handle and came. When he reached Hito, he set it down, for it was heavy. Hito jerked his head at it.

"Where are you taking that?" he demanded. If he had thought Nicanor had been trying to steal it, he could not have thrown more suspicion into his voice.

"To the rooms of the Lady Varia," Nicanor answered. From his tone it was plain that the antagonism was mutual.

"Who commanded it?"

"Her nurse."

Even Hito had nothing to say to this. But, bound to show his authority, he thought to have the last word.

"Well, leave it, and I will send another. I have a thing for you to do."

"No!" said Nicanor.

Hito's little pig eyes glinted.

"So be it! Take it, then," he said, and his voice was smooth as oil. "You can still do what I would have — perhaps even better. Now pay attention. When you go to our lady's apartments, look well around and see one of her women there. She is, I know, on duty at this time, but in what room I do not know. Speak with her, if you can, and say that I, Hito, am willing to see her to-night, and that I expect her. She will understand! Say that

I wait for her, — she will know where, — and if she does not come, I will find out why." He crossed his arms on his fat chest.

"If she is not in the outer room I cannot seek her. I am no eunuch," said Nicanor, shortly.

"Maybe she will be there," Hito replied. "See, this is how you shall know her. Look for one with black hair, with dark brows and eyes blue, white in the face and somewhat lean, as though consumed by inward fires, — of passion, you understand! Be sure and say to her that if she doth not come, I will find out why." He hugged himself gently, leering at Nicanor. "And — Nicanor, I ask this as a friend, not require it as a service; wherefore — you understand? — nothing need be said about it. I would not get the poor girl into trouble, but seeing that she urgeth so — "

Nicanor looked unmoved upon his fat smirk.

"I will do as you command," he said, and picked up the brazier and turned to go.

"Nay, never say command," Hito said in haste, and deigned to lay a hand on the slave's broad shoulder. "I do but ask it of you in all friendship. Therefore you should be grateful that I, Hito, admit you thus to confidence. For, look you, there be reasons; this, one might say, is — not official."

Nicanor's grim lips relaxed to a half smile.

"I will do it, then, since Hito craves it," he said, and went his way across the court. Hito shook his heavy jowls in rage.

"Dog!" he muttered. "'Hito craves' forsooth! I'll have that up against you, mighty lordling, one of these fine days! In the name of the gods, what is one to do

with a fellow who cares not the snap of his finger for any punishment I can devise?"

Nicanor went along the covered gallery leading from the slaves' quarters to the mansion. At intervals he shifted the heavy brazier from hand to hand. The heat of the smouldering charcoal in it rose to his face, gratefully warm. When he reached the anteroom of Lady Varia's apartments, going by the rear passages, he found no one. The room, warmed to Summer heat, and filled with flowers, was empty. Perfumed lamps burned low, swinging from their bronze and silver standards; in a curtained recess in the wall a marble Minerva gleamed shadowed white, half concealed by curtains of dusky red. A silver jar of incense, burning before the shrine, tinged the air with faint fragrance. All was quiet and peaceful, a safe and sheltered nest. From the other inner rooms he could hear voices; a girl's voice steadily intoning sonorous blank verse; at intervals another voice, interrupting, slow and languid, that set his heart beating hard and his face flushing. He picked up a bell from the stand near the entrance and rang it.

The recitative stopped; there was a murmur of mingled voices, and footsteps. A girl parted the curtains which hung between the rooms and came toward him. Her hair was black, fastened by long pins of bone; her face white and resentful; her brows were straight and dark, and the eyes beneath were shadowy. She was slim and moved swiftly, and her skin was white as milk. This, then, was the girl upon whom Hito had cast his evil glance. Nicanor kept his eyes on her as she came, and wondered if she was newly bought, that he had not seen her during the months he had been at the villa.

"I bring the brazier Nerissa commanded," said Nicanor, and she nodded.

"Nerissa is busy with our lady. I will take it in."

"She is not ill?" he asked anxiously.

"Nay, not ill," the girl answered. "It is but that she feels the cold. I will take the brazier." She looked at him with some surprise that he did not give it up.

"It is heavy," he warned her. "Stay one moment, I pray you. Will you not tell me your name? I have been in this house these many months, and never before have I seen you."

"I am called Eldris," she answered. "And I have been here also, but — it is true you have not seen me, although at times I have seen you. I have been seen by none save —"

"Save one, perhaps," said Nicanor, and looked into her eyes. "I bring you word from Hito — if you are she he told me to seek out. He saith that he, Hito, is willing to see you to-night; that he expects you, and that you will understand. He saith that he awaits you — you will know where; and if you do not come, he will find out why. Also —"

He stopped on the word. The girl had gone gray; and into her eyes there leaped a look of helpless terror, of dumb anguish and nameless fear. And at once, with the look, she became elusively familiar. A memory, half lost, beckoned to him, of a white and tortured face, of eyes which held the terror of a wounded animal at bay, of a long red welt across brown shoulders. His glance went to the girl's shoulders, white as milk, half hidden under her coarse white tunic.

"Hito!" the girl exclaimed below her breath; and

"'You sent for me, Lady Varia?'"

again — "Hito!" She flung out her hands with a movement of bitter despair and hid her face in them. "What can I do? Where can I go?" she cried hopelessly. "Since the first day he saw me this hath hung over me — and what can I do? O my God! what can I do against him?"

"You do not go willingly?" Nicanor questioned, and took note of the exclamation she had used.

"You will not force me to him!" she gasped in terror, misunderstanding, and shrank from him.

"Not I! I am no man's procurer!" Nicanor said curtly. "I give his message; the rest lieth with you and him."

"Never with me!" the girl exclaimed. She broke into hard dry sobs that racked her. Nicanor watched, quite at a loss what to say or do.

"He hath — he hath threatened force and the rack if I refuse," she sobbed.

"The rack is a bad thing to know!" said Nicanor, thinking of what he had seen in the room at the end of the passage. He spoke with all sincerity, being no better than his time.

"Ay, but there is something worse!" Eldris flashed back. "I would rather face my lord in the torture-chamber; I would rather be broken on the wheel and die the death —" She shuddered, and again hid her face. "And there is no way out of it but death. What can I do, a slave?"

The old bitter cry, wrung from the lips of many that the word of the Nations' Law might be fulfilled — wrung from the lips of Nicanor himself. He knew the full measure of its bitterness, and somewhere in him an answering

chord stirred and woke to life. He put his hand on her shoulder.

"See then, if that be thy feeling, — though thou knowest not the rack! — I too am a slave, but it may be that I can help thee." The girl stilled her sobs to listen. "Hito is a fat swine. It would give me great joy to foil him."

"I have tried to move him," she said, with a weary hopelessness more suggestive than many words. "It is because I struggle — " She stopped, biting her lips, her eyes dark with misery. "It is not me he would have now, but his way," she said forlornly.

"For me to take thy refusal would do no good," said Nicanor, his voice reflective. "Tell thy lady; surely she will give thee protection."

"Often I have tried to do that," Eldris answered. "Always Nerissa or other women are there to know what I would have with her; and always they say it is not for me to talk with her unless she gives command — that I am to tell them and they will carry the word to her. And when I tell, — " she faltered, with drooping head, — "they laugh, and call me fool, and ask why I should hold myself too good to do as others have done, and say our lady is not to be troubled with a thing such as this. That is what they say, and they are worse than he. And I fear him! Oh, I fear him!" She clenched her hands tightly across her breast and shivered with closed eyes. "By day I go in dread lest he give command to seize me; by night I start awake lest I see his face grinning in the dark, even though for weeks at a time he will give me peace and make no sign. When my service is done, I hide like a rat in its hole, wishing to be seen by

none. But he never forgets, and he never forgives, and I have scorned him. Oh, I would to God that I were dead!"

"Art thou Christian?" Nicanor asked curiously.

"Ay," she answered, without spirit.

"Once I was at a Christian church," said Nicanor.

"Art thou of the faith?" she asked, quickly and eagerly.

"Not I," said Nicanor. "What good may it do a man? And if it doeth no good, any faith will do to swear by. It hath not done thee much good, this faith of thine, since it leaves thee in this pass."

"I trust it," she said quietly.

"Nay," said Nicanor, in all seriousness. "It is I whom thou must trust. It is not thy faith will help thee here, but I, and the wit I have and the strength I have, because I am the only one near thee. How then, if it be I, can it be thy faith?"

"I trust it," she repeated vaguely, as though she did not quite understand his meaning. He laughed shortly.

"I had rather trust myself. See now, if the door were opened, couldst thou escape from here?"

"I have no money — nowhere to go," she answered.

Nicanor shook his head.

"Money I have not, but I could see that friends received thee."

She shrugged her shoulders, a gesture half resignation, half despair. And with the movement, the elusive familiarity returned; the flickering memory leaped to life. Black straight hair, framing a gray face and burning eyes; a girl, a lean wisp of a thing, with chained wrists and a ragged frock which only half concealed a

long red welt on a brown shoulder — he had seen them all before. The memory grew and would not be denied; suddenly forced itself into words.

"Art thou she who was bought at Thorney of a slave-driver by one Valerius, and claimed sanctuary of a Christian cross by the church of Saint Peter?"

Her glance at him was startled.

"Yea; but how dost thou know of it?" she asked in turn.

"I saw thee sold," said Nicanor, and looked at her with new eyes. "When Valerius pursued thee to the foot of the cross, I ran also. It was I who went for the priest, and came back and found no one. Often since, I have wondered what became of thee and the folk who had gathered." He laughed. "But it made a good tale. More than once I have used it, and fitted to it endings of mine own."

"While I lay grasping the cross, a man in the crowd cried out: 'Girl, the priest cometh! Run thou quickly to him!' And I, being well-nigh dazed with fear, had no better sense than to spring up, crying, 'Where?' And no priest was there at all; but the instant my hands were off the cross that man seized me and ran, and all the crowd ran after to see what might happen next, some saying it was not just, and others finding it rare good sport. At the river he thrust me into a boat and gave the man money to row quickly; and since their sport was over, the people went away. It did not take long." She looked at him with quickened interest, and in her face also there was new thought.

"So — art thou, then, that teller of tales, whom men call Nicanor of the silver tongue?"

Nicanor laughed again, but softly, all the hardness gone from his grim face, his eyes shining oddly. Did they indeed call him that?

"I am Nicanor," he said. His quick ears caught a step approaching from the inner rooms. "Some one comes!" he said warningly, and added, "It is heavy; let me take it to the door."

He picked up the brazier and carried it to the door. Eldris followed, her steps lagging.

"I will wait near until thy duty here is ended," he said in a rapid undertone. "None shall touch thee this night, I promise thee. As for to-morrow — well, to-morrow is to-morrow, and there is small use in worrying to-day."

She flashed a glance of gratitude at him and took the brazier. It was too heavy for her, but she staggered bravely with it across the threshold, and the curtains fell behind her. Nicanor heard Nerissa's sharp voice from within.

"Why so long, girl? Bring it quickly — thy lady's feet are chilled."

Nicanor lingered a moment, his eyes on the hidden entrance, and turned and went out with his long and cat-like stride.

In the courtyard one ran against him in the darkness and cursed him soundly. Nicanor, recognizing the ring of Hito's eloquence, halted and waited for what might come. Hito, in his turn, recognized him, and changed his tone.

"So, thou? In the dark I did not know thee. Didst find the girl?"

"Ay, I found her," Nicanor answered with indifference. "But she is on duty to-night with our lady, and knows

not when she can get away." He gave a short laugh. "Truly, Hito — since this is not official! — I had thought thee with an eye for woman-flesh as keen as the best. But that! — At first I doubted mine own eyes, that thou hadst singled out such an one for thy favor, when there be others whose better no man could wish. What one can see in long sulky eyes, a gray face that never smiles, hair like a mare's tail, a body gaunt and spare as a growing boy's — I cannot say I admire thy taste. Thou, who art so keen a judge of women's beauty, who can pick and choose from among the fairest — what hath bewitched thee, man?"

"You do not know her!" Hito said sulkily, forced into a defence of his choice. "A creature all fire and ice — well, I know she hath no beauty, but — I 'd not have thee believe it is because I am no judge. What do I care for the girl? Bah!" He snapped his fingers in contempt. "But she hath flouted me, defied me, — me, Hito, whose word could send her stripped to the torment, — and by my father's head I 'll break her for it! When I approached her with soft words, these many weeks ago, she laughed, — mind you that! — and it is dangerous to laugh at Hito. But she will not laugh when I am through with her! Also she said that she would prefer the rack. A pity that in this world people cannot always have what they prefer. More than ever I desire her; I would break her, see her cringe and follow like a beaten hound; and the more she fights me, the more surely I shall win, and the more my victory shall cost her. That is my way — the way of Hito!" He licked his thick lips.

"'And the lion said: "I find it rare good sport to

hunt a mouse; it is most noble game!"'" Nicanor quoted. His voice held a taunt.

"No insolence, sirrah!" Hito snarled, instantly suspicious of ridicule. "Because I held speech with thee to-night, it does not follow that thou art privileged to criticize!"

"If I am insolent, why choose me for your messenger?" Nicanor asked boldly.

Hito slipped an arm about the slave's broad shoulders and patted him.

"Because thou art a man after mine own heart," he said smoothly. "Because I love thee and thy bold eyes and thy dare-devil recklessness, and would make a friend of thee. Why else? Now, then, to-morrow thou shalt bring the girl to me. I am minded for an hour's sport with the tiger-cat. My fingers itch for that lean throat of hers. After, I will give her to thee if it please thee — and then we 'll see what the rack will leave of her beauty." His oily chuckle was diabolic.

"And our lady?" Nicanor suggested. "What will she say when she knows how a handmaiden of hers hath been disposed of?"

"How will she know," Hito retorted, "when there be a dozen and odd to take her place? A slave more or less is a small matter in this house." His tone was significant. "So bring her to-morrow at the noon hour, my friend. I think thou canst find a way! Till then, good-night. The gods have thee in their keeping!"

"And thee!" Nicanor responded with a grin.

Hito was absorbed into the darkness. Nicanor spat upon the ground where he had stood.

"Rather the gods smite thee with death and ruin!"

he muttered. "Now to wait for thy lady. How well he loves her, in truth!"

He took to pacing up and down the gallery before the storerooms, for the night air was biting cold, noiseless, a blot of shadow in the darkness. His thoughts wandered from the black-haired slave girl to her whom they both served; to Marius; to his own plight. How long would it be before it pleased Marius to speak and snap the jaws of the trap upon him? Why did he hold his hand? Or had he perhaps already spoken? He knew that if he were to escape at all, the sooner he made the attempt, the better. His fingers went uncertainly to the collar at his throat. He could bribe no one to cut it for him; to do it himself would be more than difficult, even if he could steal the tools. He paused before a door that led into deeper blackness. At the far end of that passage was another door through which he must enter, where many another had entered before him, and where he had seen too much of what went on within to expect less for himself than had fallen to the lot of these. He shrugged his shoulders.

"Even a trapped rat may fight," he muttered, and turned to continue his pacing. Then it was that he saw a light coming down the gallery, dancing upon the wall; and a group of three approaching, revealed by a torch in the hands of one. Wary as a buck which scents danger on every breeze, he drew back into the space between two pillars to wait and watch. And he saw that of the three, the middle one was Marcus, held fast and struggling, and whimpering like a dog dragged to a beating.

In the first moment, Nicanor did not understand. Then

it grew upon him that this had something to do with him, and it might be well to find out what. The three passed him and entered at that door before which Nicanor had paused.

"So — they take him to the torture!" Nicanor muttered. "I think that I shall see the end of this."

Lithe and noiseless as a cat he went after the three down the passage, keeping well out of range of the flaring torch.

VI

BUT when he reached the door at the end of the passage, it was closed, and he could only stand outside and listen. A lamp of pottery, burning wanly on a stone shelf jutting from the wall, showed the door, low, metal-bound, of tough black oak. He could see nothing, but his ears caught fragments of sound at intervals from within; a clank of chains, a scraping as of a heavy object dragged across the floor. He leaned against the wall of the passage, the lamplight on his face, his figure tense with expectation, his hands quite unconsciously hard clenched. Without warning there rose from inside a frantic gibbering, meaningless, bestial, horribly shrill. Nicanor smiled with narrowed eyes.

"Well for me I drew thy sting, old man!" he muttered.

The gibbering broke suddenly into a scream that rang for an instant and stopped short, leaving blank silence. Nicanor's face sharpened and grew pinched with eagerness; under scowling brows his eyes took on a strange glitter like the eyes of an animal in the dark. He crouched closer to the door, his body rigid with the strain of listening. Once more the cry of pain rose, this

time sustained and savage with despair; it choked and gurgled horribly into silence; and rose again, more agonized, more bitter.

"Perhaps he wishes now he had not entered that garden!" said Nicanor, and laughed low in triumph. Every nerve was thrilling to the savage lust of blood, half-lost instinct of old days when men lived and died by blood, when the battle was to the strongest, and life was a victim's forfeit. He longed to look through the iron-bound door, to see for himself Marcus paying the price for his temerity. Strangely, he could not bring himself to believe that Marcus was unable to betray him; it seemed to him as though the man's fearful straining after speech must have result of some sort. Even though he knew this idea to be absurd, he found himself on edge with suspense.

The cries became long-drawn, agonized, unceasing. There is but one sound in the world as bad as the sound of a man's screaming, and that other is the scream of a wounded horse. Nicanor set his teeth.

"Now they are twisting the cord about his head. . . . And yet, though they kill him, the poor fool cannot speak. I have well taken care of that, it appears. . . . They have him on the stone table, and his hands are bound. I can see it — oh, ay, I can see it well enough. I can see that he writhes in torment; and his face — what would his face be? Purple, perhaps; and the cord about his temples hath bitten through the flesh. There is blood upon his face, and it takes four men to hold him. Body of me! Who would have thought the old man to have such lungs!"

A smothered exclamation from the semi-darkness

beside him sent his hand leaping to the dagger concealed in his tunic. In the same instant he saw that it was Eldris.

"Who is it?" she whispered fearfully. "Oh, why do they not kill him and have it over! I heard as I was passing — I had to come!" She clasped her hands over her ears and shuddered. Nicanor folded his arms across his chest and leaned against the wall, looking down at her. When she lowered her hands, he said:

"It may be that our lord hath not given command that he die."

"Who is it?" she repeated.

"Marcus," he answered, and saw her draw breath with a quick sob.

"Ah, poor old man! What hath he done to deserve this?"

"Rather it is because he will not — because he cannot do what they would have him," said Nicanor. His words were reckless, still more his tone; it was even as though he cared not enough about the matter to hide his knowledge from her.

"Do you know what it is? Oh, if they would but kill him in very pity!" She wrung her hands.

"Ay, I know," said Nicanor.

"Was it his fault?" she asked eagerly. He hesitated, his bold eyes on her face.

"No," he said. "It was not his fault. He was in the right."

She turned on him in horror.

"You know him innocent, and yet you stand here idle while he is done to death!" she cried. "Oh, go — go quickly and tell them he is not to blame! Make them

set him free!" She caught his arm and he felt her fingers shake. "Are you a coward, that you will listen to his cries when a word of yours could release him? I had not thought it of you — oh, I had not thought it of you!"

"Suppose a word of mine should set me in his place?" said Nicanor harshly. "Maybe I am coward; but calling me one will not make me one. Suppose I were in his place; suppose that in my fall I carried others with me, — others who at all costs must be shielded, — is it not better that one should suffer than that our world should crash about our ears? He is old and worthless —"

"And you are young and worthy to have his blood spilled for you!" she taunted in a shaking voice. "I do not understand, it may be, but it seems that this frail old man must suffer that you, so brave, so powerful, whose life is of so great worth, may go unharmed. Why should you be set in his place? Is the fault yours? If it be, and you seek shelter behind his helplessness, you are lower than the cringing curs. Are you afraid, O great and worthy one, to stand forth and confess your wrong as any man would do?"

She stopped breathless. He looked at her with eyes hot and sullen.

"Now I should like to wring your neck for that!" he said. At the swift ruthless savagery in his tone the girl shrank back. Nicanor saw and laughed. "Since I may not, I'll take payment otherhow. As for the old man, let him squeal as best likes him. If they break him on the wheel, I shall go and tell them how to do it; if they boil him in oil, I shall go and stir the gravy. Your opinion of the cringing cur should not go unjustified."

The screaming died suddenly into moaning. Eldris covered her face with her hands.

"Oh, but that is worse, if worse can be! Why does he not tell them he knows nothing, has done nothing? Surely they would let him go! Is he trying, perhaps, to shield you?" Her voice, under all its fear and pity, was mocking.

"Not he! He would be glad to see me in his place," Nicanor retorted. He laughed a little. "Strange, is it not, that he doth not tell? — since thumb-screws and argolins soon find a man's limit."

She faced him, gathering all her courage.

"Now do I believe you know more of this than you will say!" she cried.

"Perhaps!" he said boldly. "It is not well to tell all one knows."

"Not even to save a fellow-creature's life! Oh, what are you — brute or man? Man with the speech of angels — brute with the heart of hell!"

"Perhaps!" said Nicanor again. "Why should I tell you what I am?"

"Do you know, yourself?" she questioned.

His eyes hardened.

"Who can know himself?" he parried, with a shrug of his heavy shoulders. "This much I know — that I am brute and man, slave and king. At times I am lower than man, who can be lower than any crawling beast; at times I am more than god, with all the world beneath me. Why? How should I tell?"

"You, who sing of birds and butterflies, of flowers in Summer, of sunshine and sweet love and the brightness of life!" she said bitterly and with reproach. "Indeed,

you are two men, and I know not either. One, all men must hate and fear; the other — ah, the other is of the silver tongue. Why should this be? I can tell no more than you — I can but pray that that black beast may be tamed and stilled."

"I say I do not know!" Nicanor said sullenly. "And speak we of something else. I am *one* man, Nicanor, slave and teller of tales. That is all with which you have concern. And I do not need praying over."

"Have you no gods?" she asked him, shocked. He looked rather blank at her attack.

"Why, no," he said, and his voice held a faint tinge of surprise. "There are no gods in the bogs and fens and on the hills where I tended sheep. What gods with any sense would live in such parts as these? And I knew no need of them. Why should I have learned? When my mother would tell me of one God whom she worshipped, I would go and play. Is this your God?"

"Ay," she answered, without hesitation. "I think your mother, too, was Christian."

"Maybe," Nicanor answered with indifference. "But he is not the God of the mighty — of none but slaves and bondsmen and the humble, from all that hath been told to me."

"Of those who are oppressed," she said softly. "Wilt let me tell thee of Him? Of how He was born in a stable, with wise men journeying from the East, bearing gifts of homage?"

Nicanor looked at her with a gleam of quickening interest.

"Why, that is a tale," he said. "Now I have never

heard of this before. Why was he born in a stable, and what gifts did those wise men bring?"

Within the room the sounds had died, leaving a heavy silence, and neither noticed. For of old Death young Life is ever heedless; ever the brazen fanfare of life's trumpets drowns the thin reed-plaint of death. In the passage their voices whispered guiltily.

"Because His mother went to a place which was called Bethlehem, with Joseph her husband, to pay the taxes, and there was no room at the inn," said Eldris, explaining. "And the angel of the Lord had told Joseph that these things should be, and that he need not put away Mary as he was minded to do." She knew the facts of the story she would tell him; give it form and coherence she could not.

"Who was Mary?"

"The wife of Joseph."

"Why put her away?"

"Because the Child was to be born."

Nicanor drew his heavy eyebrows to a scowl of intense perplexity.

"Now why should he put her away for doing what all good wives should do?"

"Because her child was the Son of God, and at first Joseph did not —"

"And not the son of Joseph!" cut in Nicanor. His voice became all at once enlightened. "Now by my head, this is a quaint tale thou tellest! So the God you Christians worship was a —"

"Oh!" cried Eldris; and the shock in her voice cut his words short. "Never say it! You do not understand! It was a miracle!"

"A miracle — well, that is different," said Nicanor. "I have told tales of miracles, for such things may be. And so — ?"

"For it had been foretold that One should be born, of a pure virgin, who should redeem the world and take upon Himself the sins and sorrows of all men. So an angel told Mary that she was blessed among women — but I think that she was frightened."

Nicanor nodded, as one in entire understanding. In place of the hard glitter of his eyes had come a certain luminosity as though from inner fires, an odd deep shining; his face was keen with a lively interest.

"And so — what happened then?" he questioned her, even as men, so many times before, had questioned him.

"Yet she was glad, for that she was chosen to bring peace into the world," recounted Eldris. "So they went into Bethlehem, and all the inns were full. But Mary could go no farther, and they went into a stable, where oxen and cattle were stalled. And there the Child was born; and men say that a great star in the sky guided shepherds who fed their flocks upon the moors to that stable where He lay. And it is told that three Kings came out of the East, laden with perfumes and gifts for him who was to be the Saviour of the world."

"Kings," Nicanor repeated, musing. "Then would they be clothed bravely, with jewels and fine linen, and this would make good contrast with the stable. Go on. What did they when they came into the stable?"

"They marvelled greatly that He whom they had journeyed to seek should be but a new-born babe, and they bowed down and worshipped."

"Paid homage," said Nicanor, following out his own train of thought. "Ay, it is a good tale, but as I have heard it, it lacketh something — what? I must think of that. It hath no point, no pivot on which to hang the whole. For, look you, a tale is built as any other thing is built; it must have its parts balanced; it must have cause, and meaning, and effect. This hath a beginning, but it leads nowhere, without end."

"But it hath no end," said Eldris, not understanding. "And it can have no end until the end of time. For it was but the beginning; and the little Jesus that lay in the manger is He who liveth and reigneth above all gods —"

"Now I care not for the little Jesus!" said Nicanor, gruff with impatience. "It is the tale I would get at — the tale! Well, it will come, as always it hath come before. On a night I will wake to find it full-grown in my head and clamoring at my tongue. Now we will go, or that fat lover of thine will be upon us."

Brought back to the present and its portents, Eldris bent her head, listening.

"Why, the cries have ceased," she said.

"Ay, this long time past," said Nicanor carelessly. "How much, think you, human flesh and blood can stand?"

"Is he dead?" she asked, startled.

"I hope so!" said Nicanor. "Nay then, I do not care, which is nearer truth. If I do not fear a fangless serpent in the grass, why should I fear him?"

There was sudden movement behind the door; before either could think of flight it opened, showing the room within. A still figure on the raised slab of stone, for

centre of the picture, with two half-stripped Africans beside it; three figures coming doorward: and these were Eudemius, and Marius, and the physician Claudius. Eudemius, his face pinched and gray, leaned tottering with weakness on the arms of the other two; behind them walked a slave with a great peacock fan, and another slave was waiting at the door. At once Nicanor clapped his hardened hand over the thin flame of the lamp on the shelf, and the passage where they stood was plunged in darkness. Before the three lords had reached the threshold, he had drawn the girl out of sight behind one of the squat pillars of the passage. Perhaps no harm would come to them, even were they discovered; but he had reasons for wishing to take no chances. The three passed by unheeding, Eudemius stumbling and cursing because the passage was dark. When they had gone, Nicanor went into the room, where the slaves were busy. Eldris stood hesitating on the threshold, afraid to enter, unwilling to go.

"He is dead, is he?" Nicanor asked, and went and stood over the broken body on the stone slab.

One of the Africans grinned, showing strong white teeth beneath his yellow turban.

"Our lord was a devil to-night," he said. "The madness was on him, and he would have blood. But look you; here is a strange thing." With ungentle hands he forced open the dead jaws, not yet stiffened in the rigor of death. "Now sure this be a miracle, for mine own ears heard him speak but yesterday."

"So?" said Nicanor, with lifted brows. "Now I should have said a week ago, or maybe two. Ay, if you

heard him speak yesterday, it was sure a miracle. Likely he hath done something displeasing to his gods."

The slaves carried the limp body away, and others came and resanded the floors.

The chamber was circular, of rough blocks of stone, with two doors. Opposite the one where Eldris stood was a raised dais where were two chairs and a flaring cresset on a tall standard. Around the walls hung instruments of war, of torture, and of the chase; chains with heavy balls of iron attached; a stand of spears, and another of great bronze swords, leaf-shaped and burnished. A collection of daggers hung upon the walls, with the terrible short knives worn by the Saxons, each with the two nicks in the blade which would leave a ragged and dreadful wound. Here also were great six-foot bows, such as the Numidian archers used; and suits of armor in corium and in bronze, with shields and breastplates and crested helmets of brass and iron. Here was a narrow bed, of wood and iron, with bolts and screws for tearing muscle from muscle and joint from joint. Nicanor, with grim humor, had called this the bridal bed, and the name would stick to it forever. And here, higher than a man's height above the floor, was a leaden tank with a water-cock, from which would fall water, drop by drop, hour by hour, into a leaden basin with a drain-pipe sunk into the floor. Once Nicanor had seen a man sit screaming there for untold hours, chained to a stone bench, with water dripping, drop by drop, upon his shaven skull. He had used this upon a day, in a tale he had told in the wine-shop of Nicodemus; and men had shuddered and drawn back from him as from

one possessed of unholy powers. And Nicanor, looking at this now, and with that terrible gift of his seeing himself chained and screaming in that other's place, set his teeth and muttered:

"I shall leave this house this night."

But he did not, for he was but mortal, and subject, like other mortals, to the decree of the goddess Fate.

For as the slaves went out of the other door with their buckets of sand, Nicanor heard a cry from where the girl stood in the entrance to the passage; a cry sharp and quick, as he had heard a rabbit squeal in the trap. He wheeled and saw her shrinking inside the doorway, her hands before her face, and over her Hito standing, his little pig's eyes alight.

Now the girl was nothing to Nicanor; he could have cursed her roundly for getting in his way and perplexing him with her troubles when he had need of all his wit to save himself. He would have vented his displeasure upon her as readily as upon Hito. He was not chivalrous; if she had pleased his fancy he would quite surely have pursued her as relentlessly as the steward. But he had said, "None shall touch thee this night"; and he would maintain his word not because he wanted to, but because he must.

"Keep your hands off her!" he said savagely, as Hito stooped. His hands were clenched, his black brows lowering, his mood, plainly, was not to be trifled with. That he should pay for his temerity he knew as well as Hito; but since he was lost in any case, he considered that a little more or less would make small difference.

"What have you to say about it?" Hito snarled.

"Did I not send you for the girl? Quartus! Sporus! Come back, ye knaves, and bind me this fellow!"

But Nicanor, with a bound like a tiger cat's, flung himself on the door, slammed it shut, and locked it. And he had need of all his quickness, for he was playing fast and loose with death. Hito yelled and started for the second door through which he had come and near which the girl was crouching. But again Nicanor was too quick. He got between Hito and the door and stood ready to shut it, — erect, defiant, every muscle tense to spring. He would die, that was certain, but he would give somebody trouble first. Now Hito was fat and scant of breath, and Hito was soft with good living and much ease; and when he was cornered, he turned not rat, but rabbit. Moreover, he had seen this lean devil of a slave in action before and he remembered it. So he stopped and merely yelled again for Quartus and Sporus.

Without taking his eyes off the overseer, Nicanor put out his hand and pulled the girl to him.

"If you swoon, I shall kill you!" he muttered, stooping until he could whisper in her ear. "Go to Thorney in the Fords, and find there Nicodemus the One-Eyed, who keeps a wine-shop. Tell him I sent you. I cannot hold our friend here for long, but it is all that I can do. You know what it will mean to be caught and brought back." He raised his voice somewhat, so that Hito should hear apparently without his meaning it. "Go to your room and lock yourself in. We shall see what our lord has to say to such doings!"

He held the door ajar, and pushed the girl through, and closed it, but in the lock there was no key. Hito sneered.

"Clever lad! 'Go to your room and lock yourself in!' Hast thought what will happen when she must come out? 'See what our lord has to say to such doings!' Hast thought that what he will say will be through me? What else didst tell the girl? Answer, son of an ill-famed mother, or the rack shall question for me!"

Nicanor said nothing. His ears strained for approaching footsteps, but the walls were thick, and many had cried for help before and none had heard them. He had no plan; he had given the girl what chance he could, and it was all that he could do. If she could not help herself — well, there would be one more to cross the threshold of fate. His only thought was to give her what time he could. Let her once get away from the house, and over the frozen ground it would be hard to find her trail until morning.

Hito took it in his head to make a dash. He started for the door, shouting at the top of his lungs for help. Nicanor barred his passage, silent and inexorable. He did not raise hand against Hito, but stood like a rock against the fat one's futile pummellings. For to strike a superior meant, for a slave, instant and lawful death. Hito would none the less maintain that he had been struck, but Nicanor could not help that. So that Hito battered until his fists were sore; and Nicanor stood and took it silently, with set jaws and eyes gleaming like a wolf's in his dark face. He could not hope to keep Hito there much longer. The latter, wearied at length and puffing, sat on the edge of that grim bridal bed and cursed Nicanor by all the evil gods. After this, when his invention gave out, he fell silent and sat and stared

at the tall figure that guarded the door, with his little eyes half closed. But quite suddenly those eyes flew wide with astonishment. For the figure against the door had begun to sway from side to side, gently and rhythmically, with a low mutter of incoherent words. Hito looked again, somewhat startled. The slave's face was set and blank; his eyes stared straight ahead and were dull and without lustre.

"The gods save us!" Hito muttered, watching uneasily. "Hath the man a fit?"

"See them coming!" said Nicanor. His finger pointed here and there, and in spite of himself, Hito's eyes followed it. "Bright maidens, flower-crowned, robed in gauze. Ah, flee not, sweet ones!" He stretched his hands imploringly. "Whence come ye, from the mist? See the mist, how it rises, full of dreams which are to come to men. Are ye dreams, ye radiant ones? No, for ye do not vanish. Ha! I have thee, lovely nymph! and thou shalt find my arms as strong to hold as the gods' from whom thou camest. Unveil thyself, sweet, and let me see thy face. It should be fair, with so fair a form. So — thou thinkest to escape and fly from me?"

He sprang forward, hands outstretched, almost upon Hito, who turned with a yelp of alarm, and dodged. Nicanor started back as one in sudden surprise.

"Ha, Julia, sweet friend!" he cried. "Who sent thee here to me, with thy scarf of gold and pearl, thy raven locks and thy dewy lips, with bells upon thine ankles, and a tambour in thy hand? See, our lord cometh! Let us dance for him that perhaps we may find favor in his sight."

Standing in front of Hito he began to dance, his hands hanging limp at his sides, his face utterly without expression. Hito gasped.

"What hath come to thee?" he quavered. "Fool — come to thy senses before thou art flogged back to them."

"Dance with me, sweet maiden!" said Nicanor; and suddenly caught Hito's fat and helpless hands in his lean brown ones and danced down the length of the room with him. Perforce, since he could not struggle free, Hito ran alongside, dragging back unwillingly, his face gray with fright. At the end of the room Nicanor turned and danced back again, dragging his captive.

"Dance, fair Julia, dance!" he cried; and in his gyrations brought without warning his nail-spiked sandal down on Hito's foot. Hito bellowed and danced upon one foot with pain, and once dancing, found that he could not stop.

"Let me go!" he panted, furious. "Slave — thou madman — let me go, I say! I do not wish to dance — I will not dance!"

"Not when our lord commands it?" cried Nicanor, breathing hard himself. "Why, then, I do not wish to dance either. But since he saith 'Dance,' dance I must, and so must thou, sweet girl!"

"I am no girl!" shrieked Hito, haled off down the room again. "I am Hito, and I command that you stop!"

"Now why give me lies like that?" said Nicanor. "Have I not eyes which have long hungered for thy beauty? Do I not know thee, Julia the dancing girl?"

"Thou art mad in very truth! Good Nicanor — sweet Nicanor — let me go, and I 'll swear to keep between us this tale of thy doings!"

Nicanor answered nothing. Always his face was blank, but his grip on Hito's wrists was iron. Up and down the room he went, leaping, dancing; and up and down went Hito after him, struggling, sobbing for breath, his unwieldy bulk trembling with fright and weariness. When his steps slackened, through sheer inability to keep up, Nicanor, with a bound forward, dragged him after, so that, to save himself from falling on his face, he bounded also, on his fat legs, with explosive grunts of breathlessness.

Without warning Nicanor increased his speed and danced faster. He also was panting hard, the strain of towing two hundred odd pounds of unwilling flesh being great. His arms and shoulders shone with sweat; on his forehead his hair was plastered and damp.

"Julia, Julia," he cried, "I pray you stop! I can dance no more. Thou art trained to this work, but I — I faint with weariness. Though our lord flay me, I can dance no more!" — and danced the faster.

"Stop! I stop!" gasped Hito, purple in the face. "*Deae matres!* Am I not trying to stop? Stop thyself, or I die! I am exhausted — I have no breath — have a little pity — Oh, nay, nay, I did not mean it! It is as thou sayest, of course! I — was wrong — to thwart thee! I will do whatever thou sayest, if thou wilt let me go! I — I do not think our lord — likes to see — such rapid motion. It maketh his head to swim. I, Julia, pray thee, not — quite — so fast!"

He lurched and nearly fell, and Nicanor jerked him

up again. There was the noise of a door being opened. Nicanor knew it must be the door leading to the passage, since the other was locked. He dropped Hito, who crumpled into an abject heap upon the floor, past speech or motion, and went on dancing by himself. From the tail of his eye he saw Wardo the Saxon and Quartus enter and stand gaping, dumb with amazement. Hito shook his fist at them from the floor and stuttered. When breath enough had entered into him, he screamed at them.

"Bind me this madman! He hath a devil in him. Hold him, I say, until I can speak!"

"Why, he's mad!" said Wardo, staring in awe at Nicanor, who, expressionless, danced invincibly.

"Thou sayest!" Quartus agreed, and stared also. "What hath seized him? Here, lad, what means all this? Stop thy prancing and say what thou hast done to our lord Hito, here."

But Nicanor answered nothing, and danced.

"Chain him!" wheezed Hito. "Stop him, or I shall go mad, also, with looking at him! I'll have him strung by the thumbs for this!"

And so it had been done, instantly, madness or no madness, since Hito's word was law, and Hito was very wrathful, but that interruption came from a quarter least expected. A tall figure blocked the open doorway, and a deep voice said:

"What is the meaning of all this?"

Every slave knew it for the voice of their lord's guest, and every slave wheeled and crossed his arms before his face, and wondered what their lord's guest should be doing there, — every slave except Nicanor, who still danced

doggedly. It would have needed a quick eye to see that his step had faltered, if never so slightly.

"This fellow hath a devil, lord!" said Hito, with an effort at coherency. "Me he did force to dance until I am no better than dead. He called me Julia and made me to dance with him so that my life fainted in me. He is mad — most mad — and I will have him strung —"

Marius looked at Nicanor, and in his face was recognition and a merciless triumph. He broke Hito's speech midway.

"Who is this fellow?"

"Lord, he is called Nicanor," said Hito. "And he is mad —"

Again Marius's face changed, back to its former haughty calm, in which was mingled a certain satisfaction.

"So — Nicanor, is it? I have seen men seized this way before." He spoke to Hito, but his eyes were on Nicanor. "Most commonly it is the effect of oversevere discipline, but it may be that there are other causes. Then if he is mad, friend Hito, it might be better not to slay him lest the gods take vengeance for him upon you. Were it not best to take him to the dungeons? So, you may see how long this madness of his will last; and when it is past will be the time to punish." His tone assumed sudden authority. "Look to it that you harm him in no manner, but hold him fast where you may deliver him at your lord's word. It will be your life for his life — remember that."

He gathered his cloak about him and strode away, and the three looked after him with wonder in their faces. Hito was first to voice it.

"Our lives for his life, is it?" he grunted. "So, master slave, you would be important, it seems. What have you done now, that our lord's favorite should give such orders for you? You 'll not cheat me for long — promise you that! A little while and he 'll forget you; so my turn will come. Quartus, put the chains upon him and take him to the cells."

"Please you, we are told to harm him in no manner," Wardo ventured. Nicanor had done many a good turn to the fair-haired Saxon, as one comrade to another, and Wardo was not one to forget it. "Were he in chains, he would soon fret himself into worse raving, and likely do himself harm."

"Bring him without, then!" said Hito. The two seized Nicanor, and Wardo winked at him behind Hito's back, as the latter got painfully to his feet. Nicanor submitted, sullenly. He, who had trusted to no man save himself, was forced to pin what faith he might to the hint of succor that lay in Wardo's wink. And this was but a frail straw to trust.

They took him along a side passage behind the storerooms, down damp and slippery steps to the depths of the cellars. Here were the dungeons, half of masonry, half of living rock, whose walls glistened with slime where the torchlight fell upon them. They thrust him into the smallest of the cells, and left him.

The light of their torch was shut out with the slamming of the iron door; and darkness, dense and tangible, fell upon him in a reeking pall.

Nicanor spoke aloud, with a laugh that jarred on the heavy stillness.

"When friend Hito gains wind enough after his

gambollings to remember that lean lady of his, she should be far enough away to snap her fingers at him. So, the rat is trapped at last. Now to see whether he can fight or no; for if he cannot, he'll have no chance to try again."

Then silence fell; and other rats, boldened by the darkness, began to come forth to peer at the intruder in their midst.

THE LORD'S DAVGHTER AND THE ONE WHO WENT IN CHAINS

BOOK IV

Book IV

THE LORD'S DAUGHTER AND THE ONE WHO WENT IN CHAINS

I

ARIUS rejoined Eudemius in his library.

"I have given command to have the slave Nicanor sent to the cells," he said. "It was he, as I have just found, of whom the Lady Varia spoke in the early evening. When we left the torture chamber, it is now two hours ago, I saw him in the passage outside, with another, a woman, I think. He put out the lamp in the passage, but I saw him first. It is as well to catch our bird before he flies, as without doubt he will now try to do, finding himself discovered, and keep him safely nested until we want him. He is a surly brute, but I know a way to get what we want out of him."

"And that is?" said Eudemius.

"Salt food and no water," said Marius curtly. "I have tried it before, in camp. We will let him recover from this so-called madness, first. But you said you would speak with me. I am at your command."

Eudemius shook his head.

"Not to-night," he said. "I am over tired, and it grows late. To-morrow, perhaps. Did the Africans tell me that the old man Marcus is dead?"

"They did," Marius answered, somewhat surprised at the question. "Undoubtedly he was mad, for never did I see such actions in a sane man."

"And you believe that the gods will take vengeance on me for having brought to pass the death of such a haunted one?" Eudemius asked unexpectedly.

Marius shrugged.

"I did not say that," he answered. "Maybe they will, maybe not. If you believe that they will, it is probable that they will do so."

Eudemius laughed. As quickly he became grave once more.

"I had not meant to kill him! I was fond of him — I was even going to give him gold and have put upon him the pileus of a freedman, for he hath served me well. He had belonged to Constantia, my wife. Perhaps it was I who was mad to-night. Sometimes I have thought — I must ask Claudius if there is prospect of that —" He broke off. "Pardon! I forgot, and thought aloud. To-morrow I shall be myself, but to-night I am shaken. If you will excuse me, I shall leave you. The house is at your service, if you do not choose to retire yet. Summon Mycon — he shall fill Marcus's place — and give what commands you will."

"I think that I shall follow your example," Marius said, and stifled a yawn, "if you will tell me how to reach my rooms from here through these labyrinthine passages of yours. This part of the house I do not know well."

Eudemius looked at him in silence a moment, so that Marius thought he had not heard his question. He was about to repeat it, when Eudemius said:

"From this door go to your left, until you come to the gallery which runs along the northern, not the southern, end of the large court. Go down this to your right, and you will reach your own apartments. Vale!"

Marius took his leave, wishing his host good rest. He strolled through halls on which looked numberless rooms, furnished richly, warm and silent, waiting for the guests who never came. Not a servant was in sight; the silence of midnight wrapped the place in slumber. Lamps, swinging from tall standards or from the ceilings, shed a mellow light around; his feet pressed rich woven rugs which hid the mosaic pavements beneath. Around him was a golden perfumed stillness. He went more slowly, steeping his senses in the aroma of luxury.

"How a man might welcome his friends to such a house as this!" he muttered. "I can see them here around me — Fabian, Julius, Volux, all the rest. Ye gods, how the walls would echo! Now it all lies fallow, its wealth unknown, its treasures unseen. It should be used — ay, used to the very top notch of its value. Where is the use of paintings, marbles, rugs, halls, gardens, wealth such as this, with none to enjoy them all, save a dying man and a fair-faced fool?" His thin lips tightened. The seed Eudemius had planted was springing to lusty growth. "And they are mine, all mine, for the taking. By the soul of my mother, I will take them! I shall give feasts here such as Lucullus might have envied; I can win what legion and what

station I will; whatever fields Rome hath left unconquered, I shall conquer for her. From the field I can reach the forum, with a name which without wealth I could never gain. The times are changing; it is time that men changed with them."

The words died upon his lips. He had reached a glass door, leading into the small room formed by the angle of the north and east galleries which flanked the court. This room, screened like the gallery, by glass walls from the outer air, was filled with plants, answering in some sort to a conservatory. Such rooms, used for different purposes and varied as to furnishing, were at all the angles of the galleries. Marius, looking through the half-open door, thought that the place seemed unfamiliar, and began to fear he had taken the wrong way. Yet he had followed closely the directions of Eudemius. He was about to turn back when his eye fell on some one asleep close by the window which overlooked the court.

"My lady herself, in very fact. This will be the second time I have waked her. Without doubt, Fate hath willed it so. What may she be doing here at this hour, without her women? Watched to see some one enter the court, perhaps, and dropped asleep. To see whom? Did she know, by chance, that I must pass this way from her father's rooms?"

He opened the door softly and entered. But the slight noise aroused Varia. She sat up, rubbing her eyes.

"Is it not late for such solitary communing, sweet friend?" Marius asked, approaching. He saw that she was in a plain robe of sheerest white, ungirdled; that her hair fell loose, undecked with jewels, that her feet were bare. "Perhaps you wait for some one?"

She sat on the edge of the couch, her hands clasped in her lap, betraying no smallest consciousness of the unconventionality of her appearance. Her white feet against the deep crimson of the rug held his eyes.

"Oh, no!" she said sweetly. "Besides, if I did, should I tell you?"

He found himself again in the attitude of treating her as a child; felt again his baffled perplexity at her glance, veiled and sidelong, which was not a child's glance.

He bent toward her. The time had come to crown his schemes of high ambition, and the gods had thrown opportunity in his way.

"Was it for me you waited?" he asked boldly. He was prepared for indignation, repulsion, anything except what followed. She dropped her eyes, leaning a trifle away from him.

"And — if it were?" she murmured. He stared an instant, and seized his chance.

"I should thank the gods and you, sweet one, and do my best to show appreciation," he said; and sat down on the couch beside her.

"But it was not!" she cried hastily, and moved farther away. In spite of himself Marius's lips twitched to a smile. As she retreated, he advanced.

"No? But it was I who came!" he said, his keen eyes on her. But her look did not falter. "You waited because the gods willed that I should come to you," he said, speaking rapidly, since she showed signs of nervousness. "And I have come, to plead my love, and to ask yours in return. Once before were we interrupted when I tried to speak; now the chance is mine

at last. You shall anoint my door with wolf's fat and rule at my hearth as wife. Your father wishes it — he would be glad to see our love blossom into flower. Say, wilt thou love me, sweet?"

But Varia sprang to her feet, clasping her hands over her ears.

"Love — love!" she cried fretfully. "Nay, I have had enough of love!"

Marius laughed aloud.

"So, thou strange beauty? Maybe, but I have not. And I think there is still something left for thee to learn. Dost remember a game I was to teach thee once — a game which two can play?"

She interrupted him, standing poised as though for flight, her head on one side, a smile touching her crimson lips, her veiled eyes glancing sidewise into his.

"Nay — I remember?" she said with a rippling laugh. "Why now, how should I remember, my lord? Am I not a fool?"

His glance was somewhat taken aback.

"Fool or not, I love thee, pretty witch, and thou shalt be my wife."

She shook her head, and the laughter died from her face, leaving it startled.

"Thy wife? Wife to thee? Oh, no! I cannot be that!"

"Oh, yes! Thou canst and must and shalt be that! I'll not let thee go so lightly!" He advanced upon her, but she stretched out a white naked arm to full length, a finger pointing at him, and he stopped. Just why, he did not pause to think.

"Nay, my lord!" she said, and her voice took on the

haunting tones which had so perplexed her father. "That I am not as other girls I know right well. Why, then, should my lord desire me for wife? Thou dost not love me. Were I thy wife, I must love thee, and I do not wish to love thee. I could say, — what are the words? — always and ever they are ringing in my heart, — 'Where thou art, Caius, there am I, Caia,' with my lips as well as with my heart, but not to thee — oh, not to thee!" She flung out her arms with a gesture of sudden wild abandonment, and clasped them over her eyes. Her voice broke in a storm of tears. "Now — woe is me! — all I can say is 'Where art thou, Caius?' I have waited so long — so long!"

"But he is here at last," said Marius, and took her hand.

She wept softly, with hanging head, making no effort to get away.

"I will pray my lord father that he force me not to become wife to thee!"

"Thy lord father gives command that thou shalt become wife to Marius since he desires thee, and to no other man!" said Eudemius's voice behind them. Marius wheeled, as Varia gave a startled cry and wrenched her hand free. Eudemius came into the room, his face changed as no living soul had seen it changed until then.

"I feared that thou hadst not taken the right way back," he said to Marius, and there was a shade of significance in his tone. "Therefore — I came to see."

"Father, say I need not be wife to him!" cried Varia, bold in her terror.

"Why not?" Eudemius asked harshly. "What reason lies behind thy refusal?"

"I do not know!" she stammered. "I know only that I would not wed with him. I love him not —"

"Love! what hath love to do with it? And what know you of love, little fool?" said Eudemius, with impatience.

Varia started forward, catching desperately at the straw.

"Thou hast said it!" she cried stormily. "I am fool — fool — fool — fit wife for no man! Who wants to wed a fool?"

"Be silent! I'll teach thee —" Eudemius exclaimed, but Marius interposed.

"Pray thee — father — leave the taming of this wild bird to me!" he said, and emphasized the word, and watched. He had judged subtly. Eudemius turned to him, his hands out, his stern face broken up and working. He patted Marius's shoulders with shaking hands, and leaned forward and kissed him on the forehead.

"My son — oh, my son, my son!" he cried.

But Varia, unnoticed of either, cast herself upon the couch and wept, her face hidden in its silken cushions.

Livinius came from his sick-room and joined them in a week, and was told the news. From his face it was apparent that he was pleased, and that in spite of all his words, the match would be very well to his liking. But when he got Marius alone, which was difficult, since Eudemius would scarce let his prospective son-in-law out of his sight, he spoke to him with all seriousness.

"It will be a great thing for thee, my son; thou canst carve out for thyself what career thou wilt. I am pleased; thou art pleased; Eudemius — why, for Eudemius, he is a changed man utterly."

"Truly, he is," Marius agreed. "Who could dream that behind that iron mask of his there dwelt such affection, such store of human kindness?"

"All for thee, lad," said Livinius. His tone, with all its pride, held a tinge of sadness. "It brings the water to my eyes to watch the new nature struggling in him with the old. He hath pinned all his faith and hope to thee. Be thou worthy of the trust."

"Ay, so I will," said Marius readily. He shook himself with a quick breath. "And the task will be no easy one, father mine. I do not feel myself at all a cuckoo stealing into a nest ready feathered. What I get I shall pay for, in degree, if not in kind. There will be three men's work in handling this estate."

"And the one who is most nearly touched in this?" said Livinius. "She whose poor little hands are weighted with the gold of which she knows nothing, whose child's head is filled with dreams in which thou hast no part?"

"Oh, Varia?" said his son. "I suppose it is no worse for her than for other women. She shall have all that I can give to content her. Father, it is a strange thing about that child. When I am away from her, I will own that her memory doth not linger over long with me. But when I am with her, she bewitches me. I know not what else to call it. Always I am trying to probe her; always I find myself foiled and baffled when I think that I have found the clew to her mystery. If ever she should waken from this state of hers. . . . At present she is angry, and I have not seen her for two days. That may be, but she forgets that soon it will not be for her to say whether I shall see her or whether not."

His lips tightened; in his dark eyes a yellow spark flashed and died. Livinius glanced at him, smiled, and held his peace.

It was even as Livinius had said. Eudemius was, if not a changed man, at least a changing one. Sombre his face would always be; Fate had bitten too deep for the scars ever to be smoothed away. But with the haunting fear removed that his name and fortune should fall into unworthy hands, he seemed to have shaken off ten years of nightmare trouble. His voice began to lose its bitter harshness; for the first time his slaves no longer trembled at his glance. His attitude toward Marius was curious — also, in view of his nature, touching. On Marius he lavished all the pride and tenderness of an adoring father to his son, and of both there was more than anyone had guessed. He worshipped Marius openly, gloried in him exultingly, and was fiercely and suppressedly jealous of Livinius's prior right. He hung on Marius's every word; shared his sports and hunting; tried to regain a moment of his lost youth that he might be a comrade as well as a father. At times a strange mood took him, when he, Eudemius the proud, became humbly grateful that Marius should be willing to mate with the ill-starred daughter of his house. In general they accepted each other on terms of complete equality. Each was receiving and conferring a favor; there was no debt on either side.

Marius found himself not in the least embarrassed by his superfluity of parents. He adjusted himself to the circumstances with tact and a sympathetic consideration which would scarcely have been expected of him. He managed the two fathers with consummate

skill, divided his attentions honorably between them, and played the role of demigod to perfection. When Livinius and Eudemius were together, he was circumspect, careful lest he arouse parental jealousy on either side; but when he and Eudemius were alone, he cast aside restraint and called him "father" to Eudemius's heart's content. More and more the two came to lean on the ready strength of him; since it is the law of life that the old, for all their wisdom and the experience of their years, shall inevitably come to look for support and guidance to the young, who enter the lists unproven in all but strength.

Six months at least must elapse before Marius could lawfully claim what was already his in fullest measure. There were endless settlements to be made, for Eudemius was determined that nothing should be left undone which would assure the maintenance of his name and fortune. Marius's heirs must take the name, even as he himself must do; the gold and lands must be protected so far as human means might devise. Eudemius had lawyers from the famous law-school at Eboracum, and spent long hours in his library, poring over deeds and instruments. There must be an exact accounting of his estates in Britain and in Rome; houses, lands, personal effects, and slaves. Also, since an imperial alliance could have been effected with scarcely greater pomp and circumstance than Eudemius planned, six months was the shortest time in which the festivities could be arranged.

"While I live," said Eudemius, in one of their daily talks together, "I shall retain nominal control as head of the family. When you write *Dîis manibus* over me,

every denarius will belong to you and the heirs of your body forever. But should the gods of the shades claim me before you are legally my inheritor, all will revert to our lord the emperor as guardian of the girl, to be parcelled out among his minions, and there will be left nothing. Therefore my haste."

With this, Marius had entire sympathy. He also welcomed the speed with which the business was being put through. If Eudemius had changed, Marius was changing also. For no man can look on power well-nigh as limitless as any man below a sovereign may wield, knowing that power between his own hands for good or ill, and not become either a despot or a chastened man. And there comes a moment in the transition when it is doubtful which role will fit. Marius, in the natural course of events, had reached this stage. He was sobered at the prospect opening before him; withal his ambition was mounting by leaps and bounds. There seemed nothing which he could not do. He thrilled at the contemplation of the position which would be his; for he was human and Roman, and power, and still more power, was as the breath of life to his nostrils. And he thrilled again at the absolute confidence placed in his integrity by Eudemius; for he was honorable, and that his honor should remain untarnished as his sword was the only law to which he owned. But since this would generally serve all other purposes, it sufficed.

II

OVER the marshes twilight was falling. The sun had set; the western sky was tinged with cold pale lemon; further, where the color faded into the dusky dome of night, hung a wan evening star. The land was snow-bound and desolate as far as the eye could see. The marsh-ford was glazed with a thin sheet of ice, through which, by the banks, clumps of black frozen reeds protruded. Through this ice, much broken by wheels, dark shallow water showed. On the other side of Thorney the river flowed sluggish and sullen, ice-bound along its banks. Midstream, making slow way to the island, a round clumsy coracle, such as were used by fishermen, was paddling, the only vessel abroad. In it sat two persons, the boatman and Eldris. She sat huddled forlornly in the coracle's bottom, shivering in her long black cloak.

Two carts creaked from the high-road down to the marsh-ford on the northern side of the island, and labored through, their drivers muffled to the eyes in cloaks with heavy hoods drawn close around their faces. On the island itself men appeared at intervals in the alleys between the houses. There were few camp-fires

on the beach, showing that those who had come had nearly all found shelter within the houses. The air was keenly cold and very still, so that sounds carried clearly; but, unaccountably, there were few sounds. At this, the busiest time of the day, Thorney seemed strangely silent.

The coracle grounded gently on the beach, almost at the moment that the carts entered the ford on the opposite side of the island. Eldris stepped ashore, gave a bit of money to the boatman, who spat on it and cursed. She asked faintly:

"Canst tell me, friend, where might be the wine-shop of one Nicodemus?"

But the man, plainly considering that he had given good measure for the wage he had received, was surly.

"Near the end of this street that runs straight back from the beach to the other side," he answered briefly, and heaved his boat of bull's hide and wicker to his back, and went off, waiting for no further questioning. Eldris looked after him in half resentful reproach, and started up the street which cut across the island from ford to ford, walking slowly like one faint and weary from long continued exertion. In all the length of the street she saw no one who might direct her to the wine-shop. It was deserted, save for stray prowling dogs that nosed and shivered among heaps of refuse. Lights showed through chinks from behind closed doors of houses; there was a smell of cooking in the air; at times a low-pitched growl of talk or muffled boisterous laughter reached her.

Dusk was deepening fast and the cold was bitter. Eldris stumbled on toward the end of the street, her

eyes searching the houses on either hand. When but three remained between her and the open strip of beach on the marsh side, she paused irresolute. One was a low and vulgar place, its door fast closed, no light to be seen about it. The second was a half burnt ruin, where cattle had been stalled. The third seemed of somewhat better class. It presented a blank wall to the street, broken only by a low and narrow door with a wicket, betraying nothing. Eldris, still hesitating, saw two carts, growing out of the gloom ahead, coming toward her. She heard the thud of the horses' feet on the frozen ground, the creak of wheels and straps, finally the voices of the drivers.

"Surely they will know this Nicodemus," she said, and started forward to hail them, when a word of one carter, shouted back to the other, a few yards to the rear, transfixed her where she stood and sent her shivering with fright as well as cold.

"Quicker, man, or we 'll get no bed this night. Hito will have something to say to us for the hours we 've been away, I 'm thinking."

Swift terror seized on Eldris at the word. That there might be two Hitos in the country she never stopped to think. These were Eudemius's men; if they saw her, they would report to Hito at the house; she would be searched for, overtaken, and suffer the fate of captured runaway slaves. In a panic she fled back to the blank-walled house and beat upon the door.

Instantly it was opened. In her excitement she had time for no surprise at this, no feeling but relief that no time was lost. As the carters drew abreast of the door, she slipped within and slammed it shut.

"Well!" said the one who had opened. "What are you trying to do?"

"Pardon!" Eldris stammered. "There were men passing —"

At her voice the woman looked at her keenly.

"Girl, you are frozen with cold! This is no night for you to be abroad."

"I could not help it!" said Eldris with chattering teeth. Her voice failed her with her strength; before she had time to so much as see the woman's face all things grew dark before her eyes. The woman caught her as she fell.

She awoke to life again with burning pains in her face and head, and found two women bending over her. One held a bowl, from which the other was rubbing Eldris's face with snow. Both were young; both were tawdrily dressed, with many strings of beads and rings on neck and fingers. Eldris, looking at them, raised her head, and asked the first question that came into her head.

"Where am I?"

The woman with the bowl smiled a little. She was a fair-haired creature, with eyes of Saxon blue, with hollow cheeks and scarlet lips.

"Do you not know the house of Chloris?" she asked.

Eldris shook her head. Her eyes asked a question which her lips had not strength to utter. The second woman spoke; a dark-haired beauty, she, with a profile of purest Grecian outline.

"Cease thy chatter, Sada! Canst not see the girl is dead with cold and hunger? Leave me the bowl and go get food and wine."

Sada put down the bowl and ran out of the room.

"Your face was frozen," said the Greek. "It is well that you found help in time."

"You are good," Eldris murmured with stiff lips. She was dropping to sleep again through sheer exhaustion in spite of pain, when Sada returned with a tray which held a bowl, smoking hot, an ampulla of wine, and a cheap brass cup. Between them the women roused Eldris and fed her carefully. As her strength began to return, she looked about her with quickening interest. But the room told her nothing. It was small and bare, furnished with but the bed on which she lay, a copper brazier of charcoal, and a couple of wooden stools. The women, over her head, talked in low voices.

"She will sleep to-night, and to-morrow our mistress will see her," said Sada. "Where didst find her, Eunice?"

"At the door," the Greek answered. "I was stationed there to let in you know who, and heard a knock. So this girl entered, crying out that men were after her, so far as I could understand, and slammed the door before I could say her nay. You told Chloris of her, then?"

Sada nodded and laid a finger on her lips.

"She sleeps," she whispered. "Let us go."

But Eldris opened heavy eyes with effort.

"Pray you tell me where is the wine-shop of Nicodemus!" she murmured, husky with drowsiness. "It is there that I must go and wait —"

The tall Greek Eunice laid a hand on her aching head.

"Sleep now," she said. "To-morrow will be time enough to know."

And Eldris slept, as lost to the world behind the dead blank wall as Nicanor in his dungeon cell.

It seemed to her, in her sleep, that she lay with body dead but soul alive and conscious. She dreamed confusedly, strange formless dreams, in which women dark and fair, Hito, Nicanor, and herself were involved inextricably. She dreamed of stealthy whisperings behind closed doors, of laughing faces which looked down upon her as she lay with body dead and soul conscious. With awakening came remembrance and a thrill of apprehension. She lifted herself on an elbow and saw the Saxon girl Sada sitting on the floor, regarding her steadfastly.

"Have I slept long?" Eldris asked.

"It is evening again," said Sada.

"Then I must go at once!" Eldris exclaimed. She got out of bed, tottering a little, and shivering in the chilly air of the room. "If thanks be any payment for what you have done for me, you have all of mine. They are all I have to give."

Sada answered nothing. She helped Eldris to dress, combed her hair, and brought her food. Then Eldris, in a fever to be at her journey's end and know what was in store for her, said again:

"Pray you tell me where is the wine-shop of Nicodemus" — and thought the other smiled. But Sada, instead of answering, said only:

"Before you go, our mistress would hold speech with you."

"Your mistress? Are you, then, slaves?" Eldris ventured.

A strange look crossed Sada's face.

"Ay," she answered. "Slaves, who shall die in bondage."

She led Eldris from the room across a small and ill-paved court to another door.

"You will find her here," she said, and pushed Eldris gently across the threshold.

The room was lighted by many lamps, some of pottery of the cheapest sort, others of wrought bronze, and was filled with a strange and subtle perfume. There was a confusion of furniture, and the walls were hung with curtains, which gave the place a bizarre and Eastern look. So much Eldris took in with her first step forward. Then she saw a figure seated upon a mattress on the floor, a fat and shapeless figure, bunched in many garments. Atop of the fat figure was a fat face, with thin hair whose natural gray showed through its ruddy dye, with flabby painted cheeks, and heavy-lidded eyes darkened beneath with antimony. A Greek might have called it the face of a Greek, and looked again to make sure; a Roman might have called it the face of a Roman. In it one seemed to catch a hint, mysterious and elusive, of all ages and all nations. Once it had been a fine face; even, in a time long past, it had been touched with beauty. Now it was at once a relic and a monument. The substance was the same, but transmuted into coarser mould. Where had been soft blue tracings were red and angry veins; where had been gracious roundness was gross fleshiness. Only the brow, God-made, the only feature which may be neither made nor marred by human means, remained the same, broad and white, and smooth as marble.

The woman sat perfectly motionless, looking at nothing. On her fat hands, which rested on her knees, were rings set with blazing stones; on every finger a ring, and on every ring a slender chain which led back over the hand to a heavy wristlet of gold in which a great ruby burned. Her garments were held by fibulæ of iron and bone, cheaply made; around her neck were many strings of beads, some of carved jet, some of silver, some of colored glass. In her grotesqueness and impassivity she might have posed as a graven goddess of some unholy rite. In the sight of her, also, was something so unexpected that Eldris stopped and stared.

"Will you close that door?" said the woman. Her voice was low-pitched and clear and very sweet, with no hint of coarseness in its modulations. Coming from such a bulk it was surprising — more, it was startling. Eldris obeyed, taken wholly aback. "Now come hither."

Eldris came.

The woman's heavy-lidded eyes settled on her as a vulture settles on its prey, devouring her, line by line, feature by feature, until, to her surprise and discomfort, Eldris felt herself flushing as though she had been under the eyes of a man.

"Whence come you?" said the soft voice; so commonplace a question and so casually asked, that Eldris was nearly betrayed into indiscretion. She caught herself and said instead:

"From Londinium."

"And you are —" The woman looked her over again. "Perhaps a dancer, or maybe a mime, running away because your master misused you?"

"A dancer — yes, that is it," said Eldris, catching at

the invention. "And my master misused me, and I ran away. Now I seek the wine-shop —"

The woman laughed, a silvery tinkle of mirth.

"Child, spare your conscience!" she said lightly. "See, let me tell you how it lies with you. Whence come you? From a great house to the southward, where one Hito rules with a rod of fear. What are you? A slave, my dear, and a runaway, with your life, in consequence, forfeit and lying this moment in my hand. Some one helped you to get away, and bade you wait for him at the wine-shop of this master Nicodemus, for whom you clamor. How dare you put me and mine in jeopardy, girl, by thrusting yourself upon us? Know you not the penalty visited on those who harbor fugitive slaves?"

Eldris started back from her, gray and pinched with fear. How did the woman know? Who had told her? Eldris could not guess; knew nothing but that her life indeed lay in the fat jewelled hands resting on the woman's knees.

But the latter's tone changed. Perhaps there was in her something of the feline; the instinct of the cat to gambol with its prey. She laughed again.

"Nay, child!" she said gently. "I did but sport with thee. And I am sorry, poor hunted rabbit. Never fear, my girl — Chloris has yet to turn distress from her door. How do I know these things? Why, that is easily answered, since all night long in sleep your tongue went over this and that — such a babble as was never heard. The tongue by day may lie, but the tongue by night speaks truth. My women who waited on you did piece its fragments, and came with the whole and told me. Now I have this to say: Stay in this house, and you

shall be safer than in your father's. When search is made for you, be sure the searchers will come hither, and that is the best thing that could be. You will not be the first girl who has sought shelter with Chloris. And I dare take the risk of keeping you, because I am so very sure that you will not be found. If the house be searched, no one of your description would be found herein — and you yourself might tell the stationarii so without fear. Stay with me, and you shall have food and shelter and protection from the law."

"And I — what wouldst have of me in return?" asked Eldris slowly.

"Naught but what you would give willingly," said Chloris. "Mark you this, girl: Chloris forces no man nor woman to do her bidding. If one wishes to enter here, she may enter; if one wishes to leave, she may leave. I can but repeat what I have said. Come to me and you shall be safe — I 'll lay my life on that. If you will not, well, go your way; you shall not be betrayed by me or mine."

"If you would but let me be servant to you!" Eldris begged. "I am friendless and weary, and I dread to face the world again, for there is no rest nor safety for me at all. I would work in scullery or in kitchen, and serve you loyally and gladly; more than this I will not do. Once I fled to escape shame; shall I then seek that from which I fled?"

"So be it, then," said Chloris. "I shall not compel you, for that is not the way of Chloris. You have told so much while no sense was in you that you might now straighten out the tale. I see your doubts; you do not know me, yet you have your opinion. That is right,

child; better for one's own peace of mind to trust too little than too much. But you need fear nothing. I, too, was friendless once, and weary once, and found no rest nor safety. That was long and long ago; but sometimes I think of it, even these days. So, if you will, tell your tale; and if you will not, keep it. But remember, I have said that your secret shall not be betrayed by me or mine. Many things I have come to hold lightly, but my promise is not one of them."

"I will tell," said Eldris. It was an impulse, born of she knew not what emotion. So she told, taking a fellow-mortal on trust for sake of the faith that was in her; and again the heavy-lidded eyes fastened on her, never wavering from her face as she told her tale.

"I am slave to the lord Eudemius, him whom men call the Torturer. Hito, who is steward there, hath persecuted me for a year and more, so that I went in dread of him. Six nights ago I escaped from that house through the help of one therein, and was told by him to seek Thorney, and Nicodemus who kept a wine-shop there. But I dared not come here direct lest I be traced at once. I wandered, seeking what food I might, and then I lost my way. For five days did I toil on, but yesterday regained my road. I had strayed wrong many miles, but it may be that this was a good thing, if it would help to throw off those pursuing. For unless I can find hiding, I shall be lost."

"And that one who aided your escape?" said Chloris.

"I do not think it would be just to speak of him," Eldris answered, hesitating. "What I have told concerns myself. There is no need that another should be put in danger through me."

"Is he your lover?"

Under those changeless, boring eyes, dull color crept into Eldris's white face.

"Nay," she answered.

"Do you, then, love him?"

"Nay," said Eldris again. "I think —" she spoke slowly, as though the words were impelled — "I think that no one loves him. Rather is he looked on with fear and hate."

"Then must he rear his head in some fashion above the herd," said Chloris, and laughed at the uncomprehension in Eldris's eyes.

But with the mention of Nicanor, remembrance of his direction returned anew to Eldris, seduced for a moment by sure promise of safety.

"He bade me go to this Nicodemus, and I dare not do otherwise," she said distressfully. "Last night I was searching for the place. If he were to come and find me not there —"

"So, he will be a runaway also?" said Chloris, lightly. And at Eldris's distress — "Fear not, foolish! Should not all slaves stand together? Body of Bacchus! Did they do so, there would shortly be no slaves! But that is as it must be. As for Nicodemus, know you what place his wine-shop is? A drinking den where violent men gather to brawl and gamble. No fit one, truly, for a maid! Rather, stay you here, and when this unloved comrade of yours arrives, why, I'll hear of it, and you shall know."

Eldris hesitated and lost her game. Chloris clapped her hands. Sada entered, with a glance full of curiosity.

"Take the girl to the kitchen," Chloris gave com-

mand. "Tell the cooks she will serve as scullery maid and naught else. And hark you, Sada girl! No word of last night's doings, or it will go hard with you. Now go, the two of you."

She waved them away, and they went out and left her sitting there.

"She is strange!" said Eldris, pondering deeply.

"Ay, strange!" Sada echoed. "Us she rules with a rod of iron, and yet — we love her, every one."

"I fear her," said Eldris, trying, after her nature, to analyze the emotions in her. "For she is old and very evil. And I was helpless, and she gave me help; homeless, and she took me in."

III

THE Winter wore away and the great house hummed with preparation for the marriage festivities of Marius and Varia. All the friends of Eudemius and of Livinius and Marius were bidden; rich men and powerful, these, foremost of the circle of feudal lords whose power in Britain had become supreme, and whose allegiance to the Empire was long since merely nominal. Of them were Quintus Fabius, a senator in the curia, or governing body of Londinium; Caius Julius Valens, duumvir — chief magistrate, with rank corresponding in some sort to that of governor — of Isca Silurum, that great city which in the old days the Second Legion, the Augustan, had made famous. Also came the Comes Litoris Saxonici, Marcus Silenus Pomponius, Count of the Saxon Shore, in whose ward were the Eastern Marches and the Fens, of whose ancient power all the responsibilities and few of the prerogatives were left; Maximus Crispis, who owned the largest villa at the fashionable Aquæ Solis, and boasted his own private and complete system of mineral baths; and fifty others with names as great as these.

Eudemius threw himself into the arrangements with an energy which made light of all obstacles. And of these there were many, since inevitably the disordered state of the country reacted on private concerns. From all the ends of the earth treasures were brought at his command. Swift-winged vessels, manned by tireless rowers whose one law of life was speed, came laden with rich stuffs and gems from the East; cups and dishes of virgin gold, crusted with uncut jewels; statuettes of Bacchus, the god of feasts, crowned with grapes of purple amethyst and leaves of emerald; of Fortuna, with the horn of Amalthea; of Hymen the torch-bearer, god of marriage; cups of figured and embossed glass, inscribed with sentiments such as "Bibe feliciter!" or "Ex hoc amici bibunt," — all intended to be bestowed upon the guests as souvenirs during the feasts at which they were to be used. Lustrous silks came from far-away Serica; cloth of gold from Persian looms; glassware, fragile as tinted bubbles, from the great works near Lucrinum; spices and perfumes from Arabia, aloe, myrrh, and spike-nard. To all that he owned he added tenfold more. Sometimes his ships were lost at sea; sometimes plundered by bands of pirates at his very doors. Then a messenger would be sent speeding by night and day to the agent from whom that ship had come, to return in a time incredibly short with an identical cargo — if by any means this could be duplicated. In this way he more than once sunk what was in truth a fortune without a denarius of profit in return. He wished to have tigers and lions brought from Africa, that his guests might hunt royal game, and spent many thousand aurei before he discovered that the cold invariably killed those of the

animals which had survived the voyage. So he gave up that idea and stocked his parks and forests with wild boar, — the prime favorite for big game hunting, — with wolves, and lordly stags, and the wary, wild *bos longifrons,* which afforded as good sport as might be wished.

Each day goods arrived, and messengers came with some rare thing brought by hand half across the world; each day bales and boxes were opened in rooms set apart for them; and each day Eudemius called his daughter and put into her careless hands some costly trifle which men had sweated and striven like overworked beasts of burden to lay before her.

When Varia's last month of maidenhood was nearly gone, Eudemius called Hito to him, to give account of what was in his hands. In the house were so many services of gold and silver, so many of Samian ware from Aretium, costly enough for an emperor's table; in the cellars, so many amphoræ of Falernian wine and wines from Cyprus, so many ollæ of ale and beer. In the servants' quarters were so many slaves of the field and of the household, male and female; so many trained to trades, so many dancing boys, musicians, and dancing girls. There were so many coloni and casarii, who owned Eudemius as patronus and paid house and land rent yearly in money, produce, or service, who belonged to the estate and might not be sold without it. Of the slaves those who had died were accounted for; those who had been resold, or exchanged, or manumitted, — all save two.

"These, lord," said Hito, without a change of face, "are two of whom I had it in mind to speak these many months ago. But when all things were to be prepared,

there was no time. This woman, Eldris, did attempt escape; for what reason is not known. I gave command to pursue her. This was done. But when the men found her, she was dead; it is to be thought of cold and hunger. So she was put away. Let not my lord think that his servant was neglectful; we recaptured her, but she was dead. This one, Nicanor, was committed to the dungeons by order of our lord Marius; it is now nearly eight months ago. And for what reason is not known either. He is there still, since no further command hath been received regarding him. He was taken with a madness, and well-nigh killed my lord's slave. I would have put him to the rack, but my lord Marius said nay, that he was to be held until wanted. This was done." Lies and truth mingled on his tongue like oil and honey.

Marius, sitting at Eudemius's elbow, looked up.

"I remember the fellow," he said, searching his memory. "I meant to bring him to thy notice, that thou shouldst deal with him, and as I live, I forgot him. He it was who sought Lady Varia in her garden and was found by Marcus, whom you killed because he would not betray. But it appears, from what I could learn of Varia since then, that the man did no harm — was rather a poor fool telling crazy tales to which she listened as a child. It was a whim of Varia's, nothing more. And Nerissa doth swear that always she was within sight and hearing of the two, — though whether she says this to free her own skirts from blame, I know not, — and that all which was said and done was with her knowledge, for the humoring of her lady. So that the fellow hath done no actual wrong, it would seem."

From the high pinnacle of his power he could afford

to be indifferent — and he and Eudemius had weightier matters than a slave's fate to settle.

"Hath he the privilege of trial?" Eudemius asked. "In what degree is he slave?"

"Absolute!" said Hito, promptly. "Neither colonus nor casarius nor the son of such is he, nor even *esne*, whose trade might win him privileges."

"Then send him to the mines," said Eudemius, with indifference. "If he hath done nothing, he cannot die, but his presumption deserves punishment, and this he shall have," — and was deep in fresh papers before Hito had left the room.

Hito summoned Wardo, upon whom of late days his favor had unexpectedly descended, and laid on him his commands.

"Friend, there be a dozen and odd slaves marked for punishment, who are to be sent to the mines within the week. And among them is one black brute Nicanor; he goeth first of all. Thus our lord commands. Thou shalt go with them, with two men or three to aid thee, to receive their tally from the superintendent of the mines. Make arrangements so soon as may be, for I would be well rid of them. And if any seek escape by flight or mutiny — well, there is no need to be over easy with them. They will not be missed."

But for one reason and another it was full two weeks before Wardo could get his people together; and by that time the festivities had begun, with the first of the arriving guests.

First to come was Marcus Pomponius, Count of the Saxon Shore, with his wife Gratia, a woman whose beauty was famed throughout the island. He was a

stately man, of the type which had made Rome what she would never be again, — mistress of the world. His face was pale, and high-bred, and graven deep with the chisel-lines of thought; his hair was hoary, a silver crown; his eyes, under black contrasting brows, were quick, keen, indomitable, as in his long-dead days of youth.

Eudemius received his guests at the threshold of his house, attired royally, with a torques of gold about his neck and the great signet ring of his house upon his thumb. Gracious and commanding, he made his friends welcome with a courtly ease which no brooding years of solitude could rust. Beside him were Livinius and Marius; and to all who came Eudemius presented Marius as "my son."

So shortly after the first guests came others, alone, or with their wives and daughters, until the great house was crowded full with busy life. The stately halls, warmed, perfumed with exotic plants, resounded with talk grave and gay, with songs and merriment and laughter. Musicians played on lyre and cithara, reed and tambour; there began an endless round of feasting, hunting, games, and sports. From the women's side of the house came floating breaths of perfume, suppressed laughter, a subtle emanation of aristocratic and luxurious femininity. And Varia, the pivotal point on which all hinged, the least considered of all of the household, was given neither peace nor solitude. From day till dark women fluttered around her, examining robes, jewels, head-dresses, shoes, with question and comment. She must try on this and try on that; she must be petted and caressed like a pampered plaything, and all with significant glances of pity and concern.

Varia was very quiet these days. Childlike, she hid from Marius; childlike, sulked when he found her. Childlike, also, she hung in raptures over the gifts which were showered upon her, nor ever dreamed that they were the price with which she was bought. She hung aloof, shyly, from the invasion of her home; in her eyes a child's longing to join the merrymaking, mingled with all its dread of a rebuff.

Marius, for his part, bore his honors easily. That he was popular among the guests went without saying. He hunted with the men and talked of state and war; he parried the agile thrusts of the women with laughing skill; he made persistent love to Varia.

Nerissa, the old nurse who had brought up Varia from her forsaken childhood, going in to her charge to instruct her formally in the duties of wife and mother which lay before her, looked in at the door, smiled to herself, and went away. Half a dozen young beauties had taken possession before her, with chatter and laughter — slender Roman girls, of the haughtiest blood in Britain. Julia danced on the marble floor, in and out among the slender columns, in jewelled sandals of Varia's, her skirts held high; Nigidia and Valencia, between them, examined a peplus of white silk soft enough to be drawn through the hand, and woven with threads of gold. Gratia, named for her mother, and daughter of Count Pomponius of the Saxon Shore, sat on the couch beside Varia, slowly waving a new fan of peacock's feathers set in a handle of chased gold. Paula and Virginia were turning over an ivory casket of trinkets at a table near by. Varia sat with empty hands, watching and listening. For the first time in her darkened life she was knowing the compan-

ionship of her own age and kind, very shy, but longing greatly to be friendly, to talk and laugh as did these radiant others.

"Tell us, Varia, what thy lover hath given thee?" Paula called gayly across the room. Julia, ceasing her dancing, put off the sandals, slipped on her own, and came to sit by Varia, on the other side.

"Ay, tell us!" she cried, and slipped an arm around Varia's neck, girlwise. Varia flushed, half with pleasure at the embrace, half with confusion.

"Many things, but I will have none of them," she answered.

"Now but thou art a strange girl!" cried Paula. "Here thou hast a lover, on fire with love for thee, as all the world may see, and thou wilt avail thyself nothing of him. By the girdle of Venus! Had I such a lover pursuing me, I'd lead him such a dance that when I did yield he'd swear there was no goddess in heaven like me, and the beckon of my finger would be his command."

"Thou, Paula!" Gratia scoffed, and shook the peacock fan at her. "Thou who hast more lovers than fingers on thy hands —"

"Ay, but truly none quite like Varia's here. Whom can you name so strong, so masterful, so — well, so all that a girl would have? Varia, I am jealous! Why chose he thee instead of me?"

"That were easy to tell," Nigidia murmured over the end of the peplus she held. But Varia did not hear.

"I would that he had!" she said seriously, so that Gratia hugged her in a gale of laughter. "I do not wish to be pursued, as you say."

"Now did ever woman wish that before!" cried Julia. "Even though we act perforce as though we did not. But I will say, cara, that thou hast succeeded very well with him. For it needs practice to treat a man with icy disdain when all the while thou art secretly longing that he will be bold and dare thy displeasure. When a girl knows how to tell a man that he must not, but he may if he will, her education is complete."

"I do not understand," Varia said slowly, and flushed again. "I am very stupid; but — may, if he will, do what?"

"Nay, never put such fancies in this innocent's head!" cried Gratia, in a protest only half serious. "She will learn soon enough without thy teaching."

Nigidia left the ivory casket and came and sat on a footstool at Varia's feet, looking up at her with black eyes alight with raillery.

"Tell us, cara," she said, "dost love him very much, this so masterful lover of thine?"

"Nay," said Varia, in all seriousness. "I love him not at all."

At once they fluttered around her, exchanging glances.

"Why, how may that be? Tell us of it! How did he woo thee? What did he say and do?"

Varia, laughing because they laughed, considered a moment, her head on one side.

"As thou sayest, he is strong and very masterful," she said. "How did he woo me? Why, as ever a man wooes a maid, I suppose."

"You suppose?" said Nigidia, sweetly, with a glance at the others. "Do you not know? Has none sought you in marriage before?"

Varia shook her head. She knew not how to parry their curiosity; they, seeing this, were the more curious.

"No," she confessed, low-voiced.

They looked at her and at each other with round eyes of wonder in which laughter lurked.

"Thy husband thy first lover!" Nigidia exclaimed, as one incredulous. "Poor little thing! Girls, is this not sad to hear? But then, poor child, how couldst thou help it, shut away in here where thou canst see never a man at all?"

"Oh, I have seen a man!" Varia cried eagerly. "It is not quite so bad with me as that! A man like unto no other man in the world, I think!" Her face flushed, her eyes shone. Again a glance went round. "He, too, is strong and masterful, but tender — ah, so tender!" She clasped her hands; her lips trembled.

"So, it is he whom thou lovest?" said Paula.

Again the old pained bewilderment grew in Varia's eyes.

"I — do not know," she faltered.

"But I do!" said Paula. "See, then, is this how it is with thee?" She glanced at her companions with lowered lids; they drew closer, silent. "Night and day his voice, his eyes, are with thee. His name is a song which thy heart singeth dumbly; when it is spoken it makes thee quiver like a harp on which a certain note is touched. At the very thought of him, of his words, and his caresses, thou dost flush and tremble as though his hands had touched thee. (Girls, see the color burn!) A dear and tender pain is at thy heart; thou livest in dreams, and art possessed by aching unrest which yet is sweet. Is it not even thus with thee?"

"Ay," said Varia, very low. "It is even thus."

"Then thou dost love this man," said Paula. Her tone was final, admitting of no doubt.

Varia, flushed from throat to brow, looked at her with shining eyes.

"Ay, I love him — I know it now! For night and day his voice and eyes are with me, and his name and the words he hath said are a song to me. And night and day I hear him calling me, from far and far away, as so many times he hath called me to the garden. But now — woe is me! I may not come."

"Get married, sweet, to him who loves thee, and then thou mayest have him whom thou dost love," said Nigidia. "If one has courage to do as one wills, and cleverness not to be found out, may not one do as one chooses? I know that Rubria, wife of Maximus Crispus, hath two lovers, and one of them is guest in this house. Who is thy lover, dear? What his name and station?"

Varia hesitated. The impulse which kept her from revealing the truth was dumb and blind, but it was there, and it saved her. She bit her lip.

"I will not tell!" she said in distress.

"We promise not to take him from thee," said Nigidia, and laughed with the rest.

"He sure must be the highest in the land, to win thy love," chimed in Paula, ready to carry on the game. "Perhaps it is Fabian, the friend of Marius, who hath the eyes of a god. Or perhaps it is old Aulus Plautus, of Gobannium. He is a widower these twenty years, and hath no teeth and but one eye — but his jewels sparkle enough for the other."

But Varia's face changed, and her eyes grew dark and hunted.

"Now you do make sport of me!" she cried. "What have I done that ye should bait me thus?" Before any girl could answer she faced them in a mist of quick, angry tears. "I am glad that my father's guests may be thus easily amused!"

They started upon her, in a moment all contrition, ready to embrace her and make amends; but she jumped off the couch and fled from them into her bedchamber and closed the door.

"We are as mean as we can be!" said Gratia, with reproach. "I think it great shame for us that we should not have remembered how it is with her. I am glad I was not first to start it!"

Paula and Nigidia took fire.

"What have we done save what we would do to any bride?" asked Paula. "Who could have thought she would take it so? But she is not so different from the rest of us, perhaps!"

"Perhaps no better!" said Nigidia.

"Then would she have thy teaching to thank for that!" Gratia flashed back. "And it is in my mind that the less she gets of it the better it will be for her."

When Nerissa came again, shortly, it was to find her lady alone and weeping. But this was no new thing of late. Nerissa came prepared to speak solemnly, as was her duty; Varia turned a petulant shoulder to her.

"Why will ye not let me be in peace?" she cried. "I do not wish to wed — I am happy as I am. I will *not* be meek and obedient, and incline in all things unto my lord husband! I do not wish him for husband! I hate him. And oh, Nerissa, in three days —"

She wept afresh. Nerissa stroked her hair.

"There, then, lady-bird, never take it so! It is right that all maids should wed. The lord Marius will be kind to thee; he will give thee great affection. At least, the gods grant that he may! Thou wilt have jewels such as thou hast never dreamed of, and robes such as thou hast never seen. Thou wilt be a very great lady, little nursling o' mine. Ay me, but it is strange! These arms were the first to cradle thee; these hands dressed thee in the first little clothes of thy babyhood. Such *little* clothes! Now they deck thee for thy bridal — and perhaps it may not be so long before they have other little clothes to handle. See, child of my heart, wouldst not be glad to have a tiny son of thine own, to love and play with? Wouldst not like to feel a round little head against thy heart, two so tiny hands opening the gates of all happiness before thee? Wouldst not see two baby eyes lulled into sleep by thy drowsy crooning? Say, sweet one, wouldst thou not like this?"

Varia raised her face slowly, starry eyes wide and very sweet with awe, young lips parting in reverent wonder.

"Ay," she breathed, and flushed and trembled. "I should like that. A little son, of all mine own! But I would not have it his son, O Nerissa! I would he might be son of a man such as I have dreamed of; a man brave, and rough, and tender — ay, all these! What should I care that he had no gold — have I found it such a blessing? For he would have more than gold — that which no man could give him, and no man take away. And his son should be like him; and the son of such a man I could love, and be proud that he was mine."

Nerissa smiled, a tender hand on Varia's head.

"Ay, I know, I know! Poor little one, we all have

our dreams — even thou — and we all must wake from them. If this son of thine should be as the one who is to be his father, it will be very well. For the lord Marius is an honorable man, and strong."

Varia made a gesture of fierce protest.

"Bah! If he looked at me with those eyes, black and haughty, if his mouth was thin and his nose like an eagle's beak, and his hair stiff, so that I could not run it through my fingers, I should hate him even as I hate his father!"

Nerissa laughed.

"Sweet, my baby girl, it would be long or ever thou couldst see haughtiness in the eyes of that baby of thine, or thin lips; and as for the nose —! And I dare swear that when thou first dost look, thou wilt not find any hair at all, much less what is stiff. Come, cheer thee, my very dear! Believe that thy lord father knoweth what is best for thee. Thou art his own; he would never do thee wrong."

"Now am I not so sure of that!" said Varia, and her voice changed and was strange. "Oh, Nerissa, it is not that I would not wed! I, too, would know what joy and fulness a woman's life may hold, and perhaps I am not too much fool to understand. But one cannot teach me from whom I shrink with every breath I draw. These things I cannot understand. When I would think and question, there is something just beyond me, which I cannot grasp, —" she raised a hand, groping, — "something which escapes me, and when I think I have it, lo! it vanishes, and I wander in the dark. Birds I can understand, and trees, and little flowers, and clouds, and sunlight, and rippling brooks; but men and women I cannot

understand; they all are strange to me, and I do not at all know why. I fear them; I am restless and unhappy. One only in all the world have I seen who was not strange. Him I could understand; when he spoke, all my heart sang in answer; it was what I longed to say and could not, and I do not at all know why. There was that in him which was in me, and yet I am fool and he is not, and this also I cannot understand. Will it ever be that I shall understand, O Nerissa?"

Nerissa sat on the couch beside her and drew her into her arms.

"Some day, surely, my pet," she soothed. "Think of it no more — never fret thyself with foolish fancies. Now it groweth late and is time to sleep. Thou shalt be my baby once again, for this night is the last I shall have thee all mine own."

She called slave women, and had them pack away the scattered silks and gauzes in the chests from which they had been taken, and make all ready for the night. Thereafter she sent them all away, even the body-slaves and tire-women, and herself waited upon her mistress. She freed Varia's hair from the jewelled pins which held it, combed its dusky length, and braided it in two long braids. She brought water in a great brazen jar, and filled the sunken marble bath in the red-tiled bathroom, and bathed her lady with scented soaps and perfumes. She cradled her in her arms, wrapped in warm rugs, and rocked and crooned old slumber songs as though her charge had been in fact a child again.

The lamps burned low, the room was warm and still. Varia, nestled in the arms that had been to her a mother's arms, stirred drowsily once or twice, and each time

Nerissa bent over her, and felt her feet beneath the rugs to see that they were warm, studying with tender care the soft outline of rounded cheek, the long lashes down-dropped to hide the starry eyes, the quiet rise and fall of breath.

"She is but a child! She will forget!" she murmured.

But Varia spoke, in a voice straight from the land of dreams, opening upon her eyes misty with sleep.

"One does not forget!" she said drowsily. "One loses a thing, for a long time, it may be, but some shadow of that thing is always left, even to a fool. Is it not so?"

"Ay, if thou sayest," said Nerissa, as readily as she would have agreed that pigs were butterflies if her lady had willed them so. But Varia was asleep before she spoke.

All through that night Nerissa held her nursling in fond, anxious arms that knew no weariness, brooding over her as a mother with her child.

Just as gray dawn came drifting in at the windows, the feast in the great house broke up, and the guests, most of them half drunken, sought their rooms. And just at dawn word began to pass from station to station, and from town to town, of a city set in flames — fair Anderida in the South, as the crow flies, sixty Roman miles away. But of this, and what it portended, the villa knew nothing.

IV

MANY things happened that day which the villa and the world came to know too well. The sun was scarcely an hour high when mounted men rode to the villa, demanding to see its lord. Of these, one was Aurelius Menotus, one of the two duumviri or governors of Anderida; and with him was his son Felix, small and fair of skin, with weak eyes and a loose, stubborn mouth, who wore no sword and whose arm was in a sling. Slaves brought them to Eudemius, and he welcomed them, and they told their tale. Aurelius was a shrunken man, with a baboon face, straggling gray hair, and hands perfect as those of a god. He had ridden hard all night, and was pasty pale with fatigue and trouble; and his staff, mostly old men, were in hardly better plight. Two of the servants with them were wounded; it was told that a third had died on the road. They were cared for and given food and wine, and Eudemius sent for Marius to hear also what they had to tell. No other guests were stirring.

"Two nights ago men came upon us," Aurelius said, in his thin and nervous voice. "They come, men say, from Gaul, driven thence by Attila the Hun, and seek

safety among their kinsfolk who are already here. No man can tell how the trouble first began. The first that we in the palace knew, a soldier of the watch came and warned the guard that there was fighting in the lower quarters of the city. For long no one could tell what was the trouble; it was dark, and there was much confusion. I sent out milites stationarii to quell the tumult; these reported that the insurgents, who have given much trouble of late, had joined openly with the barbarians; had overthrown the temple of Jupiter and slain the Flamen Dialis. Two hours before midnight, that night, the public baths were blown up in their own steam, and fire broke out in various parts of the city. The barbarians, inflamed with wine and the example of the insurgents, began to plunder. Thou knowest my forces have been steadily diminished these last three years, and together the barbarians and the insurgents outnumbered the Augustans five to one. My colleague in office, Titus Honius the Abulcian, going out to pacify the people, was slain. I and my companions fled just before daybreak yesterday. Many people have taken to the forest. The city is now a very hell of drunkenness, rapine, fire, and smoke. And this, it seems to me, is but the beginning. Those barbarians who have long been settled here, upon the Eastern Shore, and those who still keep coming, will together outnumber us, insurgents and Augustans both. It is in my mind to propose that we, the lords of the cities, send again to Ætius, proconsul in Gaul, for help, even as we did two years ago."

"I fear that is what it must come to," said Eudemius, thoughtfully. He turned to Marius. "Think you that Ætius can spare us a legion again?"

Marius shrugged his shoulders.

"It is hard to say," he answered. "I think it likely that he will, if he be not himself too hard pressed."

"Marcus Pomponius and Quintus Fabius are here, with many others of the lords," said Eudemius. "We celebrate this day the betrothal feast of my daughter and Marius here, —" he laid a hand on the young tribune's shoulder, —"and in three days the marriage. If you will stay, we may talk of this together."

"I feel scarce in humor for marriage feasts and gaiety," said Aurelius. "My people are dead, my city falling to ashes. But I will stay at least long enough to discuss what plans we may think of for relief. If aught is to be done it should be done quickly."

"Rest now," Eudemius said, "and to-night, if you will, join us at the feasting." He clapped his hands, and when slaves came, ordered that his new guests be taken to rooms and baths prepared for them. They went away, a weary and dejected set of men. Eudemius and Marius paced the gallery together.

"If Ætius cannot send help —" said Eudemius, following his own train of thought.

"Have you arms in the house and slaves who can use them?" said Marius, following his. "Anderida is but sixty miles away, and if these barbarians be, as Aurelius thinks, inflamed with wine and blood, they will not stop to think whether or not they attack those who have attacked them."

Eudemius stopped in his stride.

"You think — that?" he said with worried brows. "It had not occurred to me. There have been uprisings, of course, but for the most part the Saxons have

been peaceful. It is the insurgents who have given most trouble. But you are right; no man can foresee what may happen these days. I will call Hito and bid him number the slaves who are capable of bearing arms."

Hito received his orders, and in turn called Wardo, and bade him release all prisoners sentenced to the mines save those suspected of anti-Augustan sympathies. These, it was considered, would be most likely to take sides with the barbarians, as the insurgents had done at Anderida, and it would be as well to get them out of the way. The villa, being some miles off both the Noviomagus road and the Bibracte road, might remain unmolested; the fury of barbarians and insurgents might spend itself on the towns nearer the coast, — Regnum, Portus Magnus, and the like. Still, their lord had decided that they must be prepared for whatever might come to pass, and prepared they must be. Wardo said little during Hito's peroration, smiled once or twice at its commencement, and at its close expressed his willingness to obey. He stated that he knew of but a half dozen of those sentenced to punishment who might be suspected of sympathy with the insurgents, and declared that two men would be quite sufficient to act as guard. He was given full permission to arrange the matter as he chose, — Hito stipulating only that he and his men should return as promptly as possible, — and went off whistling softly between his teeth. That day there was much activity in the armory and in the slaves' quarters; and rumors flew darkly, and men believed all that they were told.

Toward evening, Aurelius, unable to rest for the burden of apprehension that was on him, begged that the

lords might meet in council without delay, that measures should be taken for the relief of the harassed island. Therefore, while slaves were busy in the Hall of Columns, where the betrothal feast was to be held, while Varia, amid stormy tears, was arrayed by her servants for the ceremonies, and the women guests were absorbed in toilet mysteries, those of the men who were governors or who were possessed of greatest power in their own cities, were summoned to the library of their host.

Eudemius spoke first, gravely, with Aurelius, pale and silent, on his right hand, and on his left Marius, thin-lipped and alert, all the soldier in him roused. And Marius, of all the men present, was the youngest.

"Friends," said Eudemius, "I have gathered you here together on a matter of much moment. You all know Aurelius Menotus, governor of Anderida. He hath a tale to tell you, which I doubt not will prove startling. When it is told, we should take counsel together, those of us who are here, without waiting for the lords and governors who for one reason and another are not with us. With some of these we are, as you know, not on good terms. There hath been jealousy and strife, much rivalry and more ill-feeling, between the cities. Now, if we hope to save ourselves, all this must be forgotten. If we never agreed before, we must agree now, for a common foe threatens us, against whom nothing short of our united strength will avail."

He ceased; and Aurelius rose and faced a silent room, standing beside the table, with nervous fingers feeling at a scroll which lay there.

"Friends," he began, and cleared his throat and hesitated, "I am here before ye, a man without a home, a

"Half a dozen young beauties had taken possession — girls of the haughtiest blood in Britain."

governor without a city. Two nights ago Saxons landed on our coasts, among the marshes, and entered Anderida. The details of the whole I have not yet learned; whether they assaulted first, or were provoked by some real or fancied injury of the citizens. However this may be, they set upon us, and slew us, and were joined by certain of the insurgents, who, it seems, have only awaited a chance to rise in open revolt against the Empire, as represented in us. United, they outnumbered those who were loyal to me by ten to one, and I and mine, being all unprepared, were forced to flee. We fought our way out of the city, and fled with others into the forest, leaving the barbarians and the insurgents in possession. The temple of Jupiter is destroyed and his priests are killed; the statues of the Emperor in the Forum are wantonly shattered. One of the flamens who escaped joined our party as we fled, and said that those who have committed these outrages are not Goths nor Vandals, nor yet Saxons in revolt, but Romans, men of our own blood, who should be of our religion. They it was who destroyed, and incited the barbarians to greater excesses. Now I am come to you to plead for help. We stand on the brink of great danger, and we are in no position to help ourselves. It is to others that we must look. Where are our troops? We have none, or next to none. Daily these barbarians encroach upon us; our seas swarm with pirates, and we cannot resist."

Marcus Pomponius, the Count of the Saxon Shore, raised his head and looked at him.

"You are right, but you have not told all, — not so much as the half of it," he said. His voice was low and deep, and resonant as a trumpet. "You, living here in

the South, in Britannia Prima, can have no idea of how things are in Maxima Cæsariensis, in Flavia Cæsariensis, or on the Eastern Shore. One month ago, Constantine, my son, came from Deva. He says that these provinces are no longer Roman, but Saxon, and that for the most part without force or bloodshed. As for me and those who were before me, year by year we have seen our power weakening, our troops drawn off, cohort by cohort, until our ward of the Eastern Marches is but an empty mockery. It is simply that, as we have retreated, Saxons have advanced, inch by inch, until now they have gained a foothold from which I believe no power that we may bring can dislodge them. They have settled in our towns, mingled with us, married our women, obeyed our laws — but they are here; and they are not of us, but alien, and they will stay. I hold that this, the beginning of the end, began twenty-seven years ago, when Fabian Procinus, the consul, abandoned Eboracum and moved to the southern provinces with his forces. We can all remember that day, I think. What happened? Saxons entered that deserted city and established themselves there. When they became crowded, they moved, not back to their northern fastnesses, but down to other cities and towns of ours. And they are there still. The towns which we destroyed, hoping thus to stay them, they rebuilt. It is true that for the most part they have been peaceable and orderly; but it is also true that when fresh bands have come upon us, these settled ones have sided with them against us. This is where blood is spilled. They may be trying to find peace for themselves, and a land to rest in, but slowly and surely they are either absorbing us or

driving us into the sea. This is what we must face to-day."

Two or three nodded, half reluctantly, as though they recognized a fact long known, and held aloof so far as might be. Pomponius glanced from grave face to grave face. His voice dropped a note lower. Not for nothing had he been trained to speak in the Forum before men.

"Friends, the fault of the whole matter lieth with us, in Roman hands. If Romans lose Britain, and if Saxons win it, it will be the fault of none but Romans."

A murmur went through the room, wordless, speaking more plainly than words. Pomponius raised his hand.

"Have patience, I pray you, and hear me! What I shall say is, in a manner, treason against our divinity, our lord Emperor, yet before now truth hath been found in treason. The crux of the whole matter lieth in the fact that we, Romans, lords paramount of Britain, have divided ourselves into two sects — religious, if you will; but when was not religion used for State purposes, or State purposes for religion? You cannot divide the two. We are polytheists, worshipping the ancient gods of our fathers, or we are Augustans, worshipping the divinity of our lord Emperor. And of the two, which is the true faith hath nothing at all to do with the matter. The point lieth in the fact that there are two. Beset as we are by outer dangers, it needs small wit to see that our sole hope is in unity of thought and purpose. This division, for ourselves, was bad enough. It was worse when we found pitted against us two other religions, of two separate peoples here with whom we

had to deal. One, the religion of the ancient Gaels, which we found here, and which was druidical and wholly abhorrent in our eyes; the other, the religion of the Goths and Saxons, which, like our own elder faith, was polytheistic.

"You know that Rome's policy hath ever been to absorb, to make bone of her bone and flesh of her flesh what she hath taken for her own. And herein lies her true greatness. But Gaelic or British gods would never unite with Roman gods; it was an alien creed, with no single point in common. Gothic gods would so unite, — mark you that, — for Gothic religion differed from Roman only in the names of its gods and in a coarser fibre which with us had been refined away. What did we, therefore, — we, that is the Romans our fathers, — for the furthering of our purposes and for the glory which was Rome's? We took the Goths unto ourselves and gave them our religion. We taught them that their Hesus was none but Bacchus, their Freya our Venus, their Thor our Jupiter Tonans. But could we do this with the Gaels, who had nothing in common with us, whose meaningless rites could have no part in the beliefs of the commonwealth? No. Did we therefore give them the privileges of citizenship, the right to hold offices of priesthood and State, which we gave to those Goths and Saxons who came among us peaceably? No. We made Saxons our allies against alien gods, and we did wisely. They fought side by side with us, they tilled our lands, and were our equals. And so long as the old faith was among us, all was well. For to my mind, what I shall tell you, and nothing else, is the secret of Rome's power. Armies alone can hold a captive people for no longer

than steel is bared, and Rome knew this. But her religion took up the work where her armies had left it. Being eclectic, it embraced all gods, — although this is not to say that every Roman worshipped all of these, — and those peoples whom she conquered were not ravished with violence from their creeds and forced to kneel at unlike altars. Each nation might find a parallel for its gods in Rome's pantheon, and so might be brought without shock into Rome's fold. For, take a man's gods from him, whatsoever they may be that he worships, and give him nothing in return to which he can hold, and at once you take from him all that anchors him to the rationalities of life.

"Therefore I say that so long as the old faith endured, it was well with us. But the worship of the Emperor's divinity was instituted; and it was something in which these people could find no parallel to their own gods. They said: 'Why should we worship one of whose powers we know nothing? Your gods, which it seems after all are our gods under new names, are well enough. We want no other, who is no god of ours. How may this Emperor of yours be god as well as man?' But we Romans upheld this new religion, with powers of government, with grants of land, with the erection of new temples, with all manner of benefices, for those who would think as we thought. To those who would not, we said: 'Worship as we worship, or it will be the worse for you.' Who reaped the benefits of this change? We, the Augustans, who had conformed to it. Who paid the penalty? Those who clung to the old order, and so defied us, becoming insurgent. Romans became divided even as Goths, taking part with them against

their own people. And herein were we in grave error, for we needed all our strength, not to fight each other, but to fight our common foes. Now it is our turn to pay the penalty for this, and it shall be a heavy one.

"The insurgents, few in number as they were, and not powerful, bribed the Saxon chieftains, who would else have lived peaceably enough among us, by promises of plunder if they would join with them. And the chieftains were the more readily persuaded to this, since it was a righteous thing to uphold the old gods, and if there was reward for doing it, in the way of booty, so much the better. The Romans who set them on were pleased; the gods were pleased; the chieftains were pleased. So here you have it, friends, the prime cause of our undoing. It is our own people, of our blood and our speech, who, rebelling against law and order, are stirring these Saxons against us. It is they who have razed Augustan temples, destroyed holy relics, and slain Augustan priests — they, and not the Saxons. I say again: when Britain passes from our hands, it will not be by Saxon means, but primarily by Roman treachery. And Saxons, profiting by our internal strife and their own position, will reap the benefits."

He ceased; and his words hung in the silence of the room. They looked at him, grave bearded men; and the truth of what he said was in their faces.

"You speak as though we were in fault," said an old man, querulously, far down the room. "Our fathers, not we, have done these things."

"Our fathers were Romans, and we are Romans, and their mistakes are our heritage," said Pomponius, sternly.

"Let us have care that we leave no such heritage to those who shall call us fathers."

"Britain is not out of our hands yet," said Aurelius. "And it is for us to keep her there. — How?"

Again there fell a silence. Out of it a musing voice spoke.

"No troops in Britain; Gaul, our nearest help, beset by Huns. . . . But Gaul is our only hope. We must ask Ætius for a legion as we did two years ago."

A shrug went around the assembly. Plainly it said: "There is no other thing to do."

"If we could but agree to act together in this!" said the old man. Men called him Paulus Atropus, and bore with his senility for sake of what he had been. "It would seem that in this matter there can be no room for argument; we all must think alike for once. But should we not wait to hear from those of our colleagues who are absent, before we move?"

"What need?" Aurelius asked feverishly. "As you say, they can but think as we do. There is nothing else to be done; and if we wait to hear from them, and to discuss pro and con, we shall gain nothing and lose time. It is for their safety, as well as ours."

"I think we should wait until they can join with us," said Paulus stubbornly. The talk eddied over his head.

"Who will go?" said Caius Valens; and men turned their eyes to Marius. He was the only man in active service there, though not the only one who had seen it. "It needs one swift and sure."

"Why not Marius?" Pomponius said, with a friendly glance at Marius. "Once before he hath come from

Gaul to our aid; he can win to Ætius quicker than any of us; he is a soldier, and knows conditions, and what to ask for."

Eudemius made a gesture of protest.

"Friends, believe that I, too, have the best interests of our country at heart," he said quickly. "But Marius, who shortly becomes my son, is the one hope of my old age. I would not call him back from what is his duty; if this mission falls to him I shall be the first to speed him. But what need is there for such frantic haste? There have been attacks before, as severe as this one. Also this is not the first time we have thought of appealing for help. The need is no more imperative now than many times before. Therefore, if he be chosen, I pray you a little time. To-day is his betrothal; in three days his marriage. Until then, leave him to me!"

Few of the lords present but knew Eudemius's story and the conditions under which his daughter's marriage would take place; and none who knew did not sympathize.

"A week would be time," said Pomponius, and one or two nodded. But Aurelius struck his clenched fist upon the table.

"Nay!" he shouted. "I say that he should start this day! It is *my* city that burns!"

"I am ready," said Marius. "You all know that I shall start this night if you will it so. But I promise you that this delay shall harm us nothing, since I shall send ahead at once to post relays to the coast, and give command for a vessel to be in waiting at Rutupiæ. As to whether I shall be successful, that is another

question. It seems to me that Ætius will have need of all his men for himself. They are none too many."

"Do the best you can, and it will be all we ask," said Pomponius.

Old Paulus, at his end of the table, leaned his face forward upon his hand.

"Friends, this is the first time in the history of the world that Rome hath withheld aid from her sons who needed it, and cast them off to shift as best they could. And I have lived to see it! I have indeed lived too long!"

Again heads nodded, gravely and sombrely. Paulus was not alone in his bitterness. For the first time in the history of the world men stood aside and watched their country falling into ruins before their eyes with a swiftness greater in proportion to its mighty length of life than ever country had fallen before; and it was a bitter sight.

Pomponius, courtly, ever mindful of others, was first to shake off the gloom to which Paulus had given voice.

"Friends, we must not make this a solemn betrothal feast!" he said. "We have agreed — the most of us — that the danger is not over pressing. Let us then set aside care while we may, for these few days, at least. Our host did not bring us together to see long faces. While we live, let us live!" He turned to Marius. "For sake of thee and thy bride, friend, we will forget as we may the clouds which threaten us. Look to it that when shortly we call on you, we find no cause to regret it."

"You shall find no cause," said Marius.

That afternoon Aurelius departed with his people.

He would see for himself what damage had been wrought upon his city, and whether or not it was still in the hands of the insurgents and barbarians. He was in no humor for betrothal feasts and merrymaking when his city was lost. He had come there hoping to obtain help and prompt concerted action on the part of his colleagues. He could not get it; so he would go away again.

But he left behind him Felix, his pale-eyed son, who was wounded and wore his arm in a sling, and for doing so gave no man his reasons.

V

WARDO, the tall Saxon, sword-girt and muffled in his cloak, lighted his torch at the cresset which burned at the head of the passage behind the storerooms, and started down the slimy steps leading to the dungeon levels. Evening had fallen, fragrant with warm earth-scents and the odors of flowers; a silent night of Spring, when Earth slept and gathered strength for the new life she should bring forth.

All that could be heard of the high feasting going on in the great house was a haunting snatch of music drifting now and again into the night on the soft air. Yet Wardo knew that in the Hall of Columns, with its rare frescoes, its lights and perfumes and flowers, men and women, robed in the splendor of their wealth and station, were drinking the health of the betrothed pair from cups which each had cost ten times its weight in gold; that wrestlers, brought from the arena at Uriconium, were striving with sweat and strain for the purse of twenty sestertii offered to the winner; and dancing girls from far Arabia were posing to the plaintive wail of reeds and the thin tinkle of cymbals. But of all this the rear courts knew nothing. Here was only

hurrying to and fro of jaded slaves laden with amphoræ of wine and oil and honey; the smell of roasting meats, the clash of pots and kettles. Here, behind the scenes, were the ropes and pulleys which set the stage that the actors might strut through their lordly parts; here was no relaxation and luxurious ease, but labor stern and unremitting, since always pleasure must be paid for by toil.

But Wardo, on his special mission, was exempt from menial tasks. He descended the steps, from level to level, in a stone-bound stillness, the nails in his sandals striking at times faint sparks of light from the uneven flagging he trod. Near the door of Nicanor's cell he paused.

His light, flung upon rough-hewn walls, showed down three steps the grated doors of the wine-cellars. Away to his right, down a narrow pitch-black tunnel, were the walls of the hypocausts behind which fires roared and ravened. Through these tunnels, in Summer, the furnaces were approached to be repaired and cleaned.

"If the light fall upon him too suddenly, it may blind him," said Wardo. "And perhaps he sleeps. I will go softly and make sure."

He thrust his torch into an iron socket in the wall, and went to the door of Nicanor's prison hole. Here he felt with stealthy hands for the small wicket, to be shut or opened only from the outside, built in every cell-door that a warder might hear or see what his prisoner did within. This he pushed back an inch, carefully, without noise, and bent his ear to the opening.

So he heard a voice issuing out of the eternal darkness within; a voice steady and resonant, and sustained

as though it had been speaking for some time. Out of the darkness it reached his ears as a thing disembodied, seeming scarcely of the earth or of human lips. In it was a thrill born of the pure joy of creation; prisoned, it yet was free with a freedom whose limits were the limits of earth and sky and thought, unchained, recking not of dripping walls nor aching darkness, for these things were nothing.

"Out of the East three Kings came riding, on padded camels with harness of gold. One was lord of the kingdom of life, and one of the kingdom of love, and one of the kingdom of death, and each one had said: 'Behold me! I am supreme.' But they heard that there lived one mightier than they; and first they scoffed, and next they marvelled, and then they came to see. People ran to watch them as they passed upon their journey, and called them great and mighty; and to himself each said: 'They speak of me.' Each wore about his neck a torques of gold; and in the first was set a diamond, and in the second was set a ruby, hot as passion, and in the third was set a pearl. Slaves walked behind them, bearing hampers filled with gifts for that one who was mightier than they; forty and four were the slaves that walked behind them, and the hampers were covered with cloth of gold.

"So came they to their journey's end at nightfall, when the weary earth was sinking into rest; and they looked about them for a palace more splendid than their own, fitting for that one who was mightier than they. But there were only the houses of the town, and stables. They asked of strangers where such a palace might be, and none could tell them. Then asked they if a very

great and mighty king had been there, and folk shook their heads and answered nay. There were many strangers, and all the inns were full, but there was no mighty king that they had seen. One said: 'It may be that he goeth in disguise,' and the others answered: 'That may be so.' So they alighted and went into an inn; and across the courtyard of the inn, in the stalls under the house where cattle stood, they saw a group of people, three or four.

"And in the centre of the group a bearded man was kneeling, and beside him, upon clean straw, lay a Woman and her Child. The Kings stood within the stable, and their greatness was as a glory of light upon the place. Chains of gold they wore upon their necks, and rings upon their hands, and the crowns upon their heads were bright with jewels. They looked at the Woman that lay upon the straw against her man's knees; and she was fair and young and tender, and her eyes were full of joy and pain. And one whispered to them: 'Behold, but now she hath brought a man-child into the world, here in this place, among sweet-breathing oxen and lowing kine.' So they looked upon the Child that lay on his Mother's arm."

The voice stopped short, and silence reeled down upon the world once more. Before Wardo could move or speak it came again, changed this time and strained, all the thrill gone out of it and only weariness left, the voice of one again in chains.

"Eh, thou little Christus, thou hast been brother and comrade both to me in this my loneliness! But now am I indeed fast stuck in a quagmire of uncertainty. Wherein did lie thy power? This I must know or ever the tale can end. I have the Kings, their might and majesty,

their robes, and the gifts they bring. I have thy Mother, young and fair and tender, with holy eyes. I have her man, who was not sire to thee, his care for her, his human doubt and questionings. I have the servants of the inn, the shepherds. — Thou great bully Rag, thou hast stood model more often than thou knowest! — I have the cattle dozing in the stalls, the tumult and the shouting of the inn. All this I can paint so that it shall stand forth quick with life; for give me a word, a thought, an action, and I can find the tale in it. But on my life I cannot find why men should worship thee, thou little helpless Child. And until I can, I have no motive for my tale; a thing eludes me which I cannot catch. What power didst hold over men that they should bow to thee? Wherein did lie thy strength? For men will worship only that which is stronger than they — and how wert thou stronger? Was it through fear? — who would fear a babe? — A child, little and ugly and very red, as I have seen babes in the arms of slave-women in the mart at Londinium, with a crumpled mouth wet with his mother's milk — in the name of the high gods, what should men see in such a thing to worship? Thus ever do I question, and until I find my answer the tale is not complete."

There was a restless movement in the dark, a soft shuffle of sandalled feet pacing up and down, endlessly up and down. The voice dropped to a broken mutter in which but a word now and then was to be caught.

"Oh, for a ray of sun or moon to tell if it be day or night! The darkness beats upon mine eyelids like a thousand hammers, until my brain is sick and reeling. . . . Hath one ever made of this a tale before me, I

wonder? The girl did not say. Where is she now, that black-haired love of Hito's? Is she caught and brought back like a rabbit to the kennels of the hounds? That is quite likely, and will be no fault of mine."

Again the voice stopped, and with it the pacing footsteps.

"Thou here, Momus?" Nicanor said suddenly. "So then; it must be time for food. Thou canst tell that, graybeard; if thou couldst tell whether day or night time, I 'd carve an ivory figure of thee and hold all thy kind in honor. Maybe they will forget us again, as they have forgot us before. If so, soon I must eat thee, friend, and this will grieve me, less for thy sake than for mine own."

"Who hath he here?" Wardo muttered in perplexity, He placed his lips to the slit and spoke aloud.

"Nicanor!"

Instant silence fell, while one might have counted ten. Then Nicanor's voice, keen and quiet, said:

"Who calls?"

"I, Wardo," answered Wardo, feeling for his eight-inch-long key. "I will get my light and enter, for I have news for thee."

He got his torch, unlocked the door, and entered, locking it behind him, for his orders were strict. The light fell upon Nicanor, sitting on the floor, back against the wall, hands clasping his knees, and glistened in his eyes, untamed beneath their shaggy thatch of brow. He was leaner than ever, and his face was gaunt. He blinked uncertainly at the flare and turned his head from it.

"I begged Hito that he let me be the one to bring thy food," said Wardo, and spoke as one in self-excuse. "But not until to-day could I win him to it. Now I

have come to tell thee — " He hesitated; started again with a rush of words. " Thou art sentenced to the mines, with certain others, and I am ordered to convey thee thither."

" So? " said Nicanor.

" It seems to hold scant interest for thee! " said Wardo curiously, half piqued.

" At this moment, little man, bread and a bone hold more of interest for me than all the mines in Britain," said Nicanor, with a laugh. " Give me these, and I 'll show thee how much I have of interest."

Wardo found himself falling into the half ironic raillery of his prisoner's mood.

" There should be plenty of both when this night's feasting is over. I 'll see thou hast thy share — "

" What feasting? Is it night? " Nicanor asked.

" True; I forgot thou couldst not know," said Wardo. " To-night is held the betrothal feast of our lady and the lord Marius."

The careless figure on the floor stiffened, as it seemed, into stone as it sat. Nicanor turned his head, slowly, and looked up at his gaoler. The movement had in it something of the stealthiness of an animal crouching to spring.

" Betrothed — to-night? " he muttered. The hands about his knees tightened until their muscles strained under the brown skin; but the light was bad, and Wardo's eyes were not over keen to see what he was not looking for.

" Why, yes," said Wardo. " It is held in the Hall of Columns. By this time, without doubt, the kiss is given and taken, the pledge is passed, and our little lady by

rights is in another's keeping. It wants only the marriage three days hence."

Nicanor rose lithely to his feet, pressing back his mane of hair with both hands.

"Wardo, we two have been friends, have we not, ever since we put each the other to sleep with blows over the baker's black-eyed daughter?"

Wardo looked at him.

"Ay, that is so," he said sincerely.

"Then I shall ask of thee a thing which will put all thy friendship to the test," said Nicanor. His voice was rapid and tense, and Wardo began to look at him in surprise. "Let me go free and unhindered from here for two hours. I give my word that when that time is over I will be at any place thou shalt name, to go with thee willingly thy prisoner. If aught untoward befall, no blame shall come to thee. It will be easily done; the stewards are busy, and I shall have care not to be seen."

"But — body of me! — this is impossible!" Wardo cried, confounded. "I am friend to thee, but I am my lord's gaoler, for the time, and it would betray my lord for me to do this. Wherefore dost desire it? What will it avail thee — freedom for two hours?"

"It will avail me much," Nicanor answered. "Have I ever broken faith with thee or any man?"

"Nay," said Wardo. "Thou wilt steal, as I have known, but thou wilt not lie, and I would have thy word as soon as another's bond. Sure never was there such a strange fellow —"

"Then believe that I will not break faith now. How may our lord be the worse for it? Thou hast ever

been friend to me, man; we have drunk together and feasted together and starved together; we have fought together and clasped hands together. Dost remember a day of freedom we two spent together, in the wine-shop to which I took thee, on the island in the fords, when we and the five drunken gladiators fought until the watch fell upon us, and how we escaped, both battered and bloody, and left the gladiators in their hands?"

Wardo grinned regretfully.

"Eh, that was a great day! I have the scars yet. We have seen good days together, thou and I."

"And they are gone over now, and done with. Here we part, I to the mines, thou to the arms of thy fat Hito. I wish thee joy of him! Comrade, dost remember that when we say farewell here it will not be for to-day, nor to-morrow, but for all long time to come? I to the mines, and who enters there comes not forth again."

Wardo clenched his fists.

"I know — I know! I 'd give a finger if it had not to be!" He stood a moment, his flaxen head bent, lost in troubled thought. Quite suddenly he turned upon Nicanor, who, lynx-eyed, watched. "See then; I owe fealty to my lord, but thou art my friend, and this thing I cannot do. We have starved together and fought together, thou and I! The gods judge me, but thou art my friend! I have money — not much, but more than nothing. Take thou it — I 'll leave the way open — and escape. Or, if thou wilt, overpower me on the road to Gobannium — there 'll be but two men with me, and I 'll see to them. Save thyself, and leave the rest to me."

Nicanor laid his left hand on Wardo's shoulder. Their eyes were on a level; tall men they were, both,

one dark, lean, steel-muscled as a great cat; the other fair, more fully fleshed, massive in bulk as a tawny bull.

"Leave thee to face double punishment, mine as a runaway slave, and thine as his abettor?" said Nicanor, and laughed softly. "Nay, thou art *my* friend, and the gods judge me if I put thee in this plight. I did not know I had such a friend in the world. Many things have I learned in this time of darkness, and this have I also found."

Wardo hung his head, without speech. He thrust out his hand abruptly, and Nicanor's hand closed over it. They stood a moment, in a silence which needed no words from either.

"By the soul of my mother, I shall do it!" Wardo said then, huskily.

"By the soul of my mother, thou shalt not!" said Nicanor. "When I escape, it shall be when thou canst not be brought to task for it. But if thou wouldst prove true friend, leave the way open for two hours. More will not help me now."

"So be it," said Wardo. "Here is the key. When we go, let us lock the door behind us. Return here, then, and await me within. But, Nicanor, if thou art not here, I shall make no search."

"I shall be here," said Nicanor, briefly.

Wardo took his torch; they left the cell. Nicanor locked the door, thrust the key into his belt, and without a word started up the passage into the darkness. Two hours speed swiftly when they hold life and death and all that lies between.

VI

ICANOR gained the passage behind the storerooms, at the head of which the cresset flared, and reached the court, meeting no one. The cool air flooded him, and he raised his head and breathed it deeply. For eight long months his lips had panted for it. As he had foreseen, the court was deserted; all the household slaves were busy in this way and that about the feast. He cast a calculating glance upward at the crescent moon, struggling through banking clouds.

"Till she touches the top of the stunted lime," he muttered, and crossed the court with his long noiseless stride.

A distant strain of music wandered out across the night; and at all it whispered of that which was not for him he set his teeth with a smothered groan. Past silent courts he went, avoiding the teeming kitchens, and through narrow passages and empty rooms. A slave boy with a trayful of broken meats passed him where he hung concealed in the deep shadow of one court. He made a motion forward, his hungry eyes gleaming; drew back in silence and let the boy pass on.

It was many hours since he had tasted food, but he dared not risk betrayal.

So he gained a certain small doorway in one of the lesser courts, a deep recess, merely, in the wall, which led to no room. Just inside it steep steps showed in the moonlight, leading upward. Nicanor listened a moment to make certain that all was still, and, as one sure of himself and what he meant to do, ran up them, — past where a landing opened on the stairs, with glimpses of a pillared gallery beyond; and still up, until the flight ended in a long and bare passage. Here it was very dark, with only the moonlight coming through narrow windows of thick and muddy glass. Nicanor looked about him as one who would know if all was as he had left it last. A ladder lay upon the floor beneath the square of an opening in the roof. This he leaned against the wall, mounted it, and slid back the hatch, which ran in wooden grooves. The ladder creaked beneath him as he swung his long body forward and gripped the edges of the opening. Until he had made sure of his hold he did not leave the ladder; then swung clear, shifting his hands one by one into better position, and raised himself slowly, by sheer practised strength of wrist and arm, until his head and shoulders rose above the opening. With quick effort, then, he flung himself forward upon the roof, writhed himself through, and stood erect.

Around him were the roofs of the separate apartments of the villa, silvered gray where moonlight touched them. Flat and sloping and towered were these, and broken by the intervals of the courts, where was massed the heavy blackness of foliage. The night air swept cool

around him; above him was the high vault of heaven, cloudless now, where a young moon rode in the loneliness of space. To his left as he stood was the squat dome of the Hall of Columns, with light showing through the series of narrow windows which encircled it. And these windows were barely four feet above the level of the roof from which the dome sprang.

Nicanor started across the tiles, black against the moonlight, clawing his way along steep and treacherous slopes and gliding along the leads, sure-footed as a cat, toward the nearest window in the dome which would look down into the hall below. This he gained in safety, and found that it had been left half open, for ventilation. He leaned over the ledge, gazing downward; and a ripple of music from hidden players rose to him above a humming undercurrent of sound.

Below him, the great hall was a riot of color. On its hundred columns of polished marble, veined in green and rose, light played in sliding gleams from great lamps of wrought bronze hung by chains around the dome and between the pillars, each with many lights floating in cups of perfumed oil. The floors, of white marble, were overlaid with silken rugs of glowing colors, with silver matting and with tawny skins of beasts. The walls were wide panels of mosaics set in stucco, vivid with red and blue, green and azure, picturing scenes of hunting and carousal. Perfumes burned in silver jars set on pedestals of black marble at intervals along the walls, sending forth faint spirals of smoke on the heated air. The long table, lined on either side with men and women, was directly beneath the dome.

Looking down upon it Nicanor saw only a confusion of gold and silver dishes, with the ruby glow of Samian plates and cups, gleaming among strewn leaves and blossoms. The garments of the guests were as a fringe of color about the table's edge; purple, saffron, and gold, crimson, green, and white.

At the head of the board, raised somewhat above the other seats, three figures had risen, — one, in the centre, tall, spare, stooping somewhat, in spite of his brave attire; at his left, another as tall as he, but broader, more compactly built, with the square shoulders of a military man, richly dressed also in a scarlet tunic embroidered in gold, with heavy bands of gold about his arms. And at the right of the central figure, the third, young and slender and all in white, with a head-dress of gold in which two poppies flamed upon either temple, and from which long jewelled ends hung to her knees. A veil fell behind her, over her dark hair, of Persian gauze, filmy as mist, in which threads of gold like prisoned sunbeams were woven. Her face, upheld proudly as though she scorned to give way before the eyes upon her, was white, but her lips were scarlet as the flowers she wore. A jewelled girdle fell about her hips, but on her bare arms were neither gems nor gold. The central figure was speaking, but his words could not be heard. He took the girl's hand, and laid it in the man's hand, and held them so; and the tones of the man's voice repeating after him rose to Nicanor's eyrie, although the words were lost. There followed a pause, in which the girl drooped her head, but all faces were turned toward her, and Nicanor knew that her lips were whispering the solemn "Where thou art, Caius, there

am I, Caia"; and he clenched his teeth, and for a moment the scene below him swam in blood-red mist.

She was lost to him, — always he had known it, known the hopelessness of his passion, all the sweeter for the bitterness which was in it, — but never until then had the knowledge so come home to him. He would have liked to force his way in among them, these smirking, soft patricians, and tear her away from them by right of his savage strength; in his hot eyes was murder, and in his heart raging hate and a love as raging. He could have killed her, even; if she might not be his, he would have her no man's. His hand shot out as though in fact the knife were in it; in fancy he saw himself driving it home straight and true above the heart whose throbbing he had watched — the heart that had throbbed for him only, the slave, out of all the world of men. He could feel his dagger bite through her white breast as he had felt the soft slice of flesh under his blade before; he could see the blood well up around the knife, slowly at first, with a quick, hot spurt when the steel was withdrawn. So she would remain all his, and none might take her from him. His thoughts maddened him. He groaned aloud and dropped his face in his hands on the stone ledge of the window, and the moonlight touched him, a strange figure of desperate longings, desperate bewilderment and rebellion and pain. He shook to the primal passions of love and hate that tore him, — love for one, hate for all that had gone to make the conditions of his life what they must be; according to the measure of his untamed strength he suffered, in fierce revolt against the mocking Fates who were stronger than he.

A clapping of hands, sharp and crackling, roused him. He brushed the hair from his eyes, and again looked down upon them, so far below, so far above him. The central figure had withdrawn, but the betrothed couple, hand clasped in hand, still stood together. The table was in commotion; women pelted the two with flowers, and men were on their feet and shouting. Nicanor saw Marius bend his head and kiss Varia upon the lips. So was their covenant sealed before the law; in sight of all the world her lord had claimed her, and she was no longer all her own.

High in his eyrie Nicanor laughed, with a flash of his old lawless triumph.

"Thy lips are not the first on hers, sir bridegroom! Her head hath lain on another breast than thine; other arms than thine have held her, O my lord! What if this also were to be known? Where then would be thy triumph?" He raised his clenched hands fiercely, sending forth his empty challenge to the heedless stars. "Thy wife is not all thine, my lord! Her body thou mayst purchase and possess, but her soul is mine, mine, mine, for all time and all eternity! I, who waked it from its empty sleep — I, who taught it first to live and love — I am her soul's lord even as thou art her body's master — I, the slave!"

His voice stopped on the words, changed, and grew strained with infinite love and longing, all its fierce triumph gone.

"Eh, thou very sweet, we dreamed awhile, and the dream was sweeter than ever was dream before, and it is over! The wound in thy child's heart will heal, for thy love is a child's love, and when it may grow no

more will fade and die. Yet it may be that it shall be never quite forgotten; that in after days a word, a song, the fragrance of a flower, will bring to thee dim memories of what is gone. But my love must last, to burn and sear since it may not bless me, for it is not a child's love, beloved! We had no right to happiness, thou and I. But wherefore not? And who decreed it so? I may not have one last look from thee, one touch of thy tender hands, — O little hands that have clung to mine! — and all my heart is a tomb where my love lies buried. Long months have I lain in darkness, but in my heart was light, for I dreamed of the time when I should come to thee. Now all is dark, and my strength hath gone from me; I am a child that cries for a stronger hand to lean on and can find none. The dreams which I had are gone from me, and my tongue is lead. In all the earth is none so lonely as am I!"

Again he buried his face in his hands, crouching against the wall beneath the window. The music rose to him like a breath from that scarcely vanished past, playing upon him, — calloused body and sensitive tortured soul, — conjuring forth visions of dead golden hours, weaving its own poignant spell. Voices from the hall mingled with it, in talk and heedless laughter; healths were drunk and speeches made. When life was gay and careless, when wine was red and eyes were bright and faces fair, who would pause to give a thought to sorrow?

Minutes dropped away, link by link, from the golden chain of Time. All at once Nicanor raised his head, slowly, like one unwilling to meet once more what must be met. The loneliness of the moonlight revealed the

scarring passion in his face, signs visible of the chaos of inward tumult which tore him, of the slow forces gathering for the inevitable battle waged somewhen, somehow, by every mortal soul. And that face, gaunt, with haunted, shadowed eyes, looked all at once strangely purged of the heat of its lawlessness, for on it was the first presage of the fierce slow travail of spirit rending flesh.

"What is this that I have done!" he said unsteadily. "I have boasted unworthily, ravening like a brute beast in my triumph over thee, and by my boasting have I shamed thee, thou lily among women. Was I blind, that I could not see that thine is the triumph, over my passion and over me? Thou art another's, O my Lady whom I love so well; and every thought I hold of thy caresses doeth thee dishonor. For thou art pure and holy, and though it puts all worlds between us, yet I would not have thee otherhow. Yet I cannot but remember thy voice, thine eyes, thy little clinging hands, the perfume of thy hair; they are all that is left to me — dear memories, bitter sweet! But I may not boast of them, for thy fair fame, which thou first didst teach me to honor, is thus much in my hands, and I, even the outcast and despised, have it still to guard thee in this little thing. Once was I filled with base pride for that I had made thee love me in answer to my love; and oh, a blind, blind fool was I, not knowing that my love for thee was then no love at all! But thou, in thy white innocence, didst place thine hands upon mine eyes, and the scales fell from them, and I saw thee and myself, and was humbled. Now never while I live shall thy dear name pass my lips, lest through me one breath

of evil blow upon thee. I cannot die for thee, beloved, since that were a fate too easy for the sport of thy high gods; I may not even live for thee. This is all that I can do! This is what we have done, each for the other: thy soul I wakened; thou in turn didst give to me a soul within my soul, wakening it to what it never knew before, — new dreams, new ambitions, new desires. For I saw through thee the great world which is thy world, wherein lieth all for which men long and strive. One glimpse I had; and now the gates are closed, and the light is gone, and I am thrust back into outer darkness. And it all is finished!"

A peal of laughter rose to him; a burst of music; a half-hundred voices shouting *Vivas* to Marius and his bride. He looked down once more into the light and color of the great hall, seeing one there, only, out of all the brilliant throng, — one fair and drooping, with scarlet poppies framing her white face. Long and long he looked, as though he would burn her image upon his heart and mind forever, his lady whom he had lost and who was never his. So he turned away, back into the outer darkness, and crossed the roofs again, and the blackness of the manhole swallowed him.

Wardo, cloaked and spurred and ready for the start, opened the cell door and thrust his torch within. The light fell upon a bowed figure sitting on the floor, motionless, with face hidden in its folded arms, and nothing showing save a crown of rough black hair.

"Thou here?" said Wardo. "Well, I am sorry."

Nicanor looked up. His face, white with more than its prison pallor, was drawn as though by bodily pain.

"Ay," he said dully, "I am here."

"I would thou wert not," Wardo muttered. "Come, then."

"I have a friend here, whom I would take with me," Nicanor said, without rising. "Stand still, and I will call him."

He whistled softly through his teeth, a gentle hissing, until a shadow seemed to stir from the far corner of the cell where the torchlight did not fall. Forth into the light hobbled a great gray rat, gaunt, and scarred, and lame. At sight of Wardo it whisked back into the gloom; again Nicanor whistled; again it appeared, and again vanished. A third time, emboldened, it essayed, and came to Nicanor warily, dazed in the unwonted light. Nicanor threw a bit of cloth torn from his tunic over its head, fastening it so that the beast could neither bite nor see, tied its forelegs together, and without more ado thrust it inside his tunic. Wardo gaped.

"Well, of all playmates! Will he not scratch thee?"

"Not while the cloth is about his head," Nicanor answered. There came an odd note of pride into his voice. "Momus and I are old friends. I maimed him; he hath bitten me. Now we understand each other. I have taught him to fight, — he is quite as intelligent as Hito, — and there is not a rat in the dungeons that can beat him. Man, you should see him fight!"

"I'd like to!" quoth Wardo, promptly. "Maybe, at Cunetio or Corinium we shall find some trainer to try a main with thee. Now come; we have tarried long enough."

In the slaves' court Hito was fuming over the departure of his deputy and the half dozen prisoners. As

Wardo and Nicanor approached he leered upon them balefully.

"So, white-face!" he taunted. "Art recovered from thy madness?"

"Ha, fair Julia, how art thou?" Nicanor greeted him imperturbably, so that Hito cursed him. For word of Hito's dance had spread, and even his lords had laughed at him.

"Oh, ay, I remember!" he snarled. "This is to teach thee not to call thy betters names. Were it not for thy insubordination, I should have cancelled thy sentence to the mines. It is not well to laugh at Hito! I have a doubt in my mind that thou wert not so mad as it seemed."

"I have no doubt in mine that I was not so mad as thou," said Nicanor, with all cheerfulness.

Hito glared, and Wardo mounted and made haste to get his party under way. His assistant snapped the chains on Nicanor's wrists which bound him to his fellows, and got on his own horse. They went out through the gate, opened by a sleepy porter, and took the road.

All through that night they plodded steadily. Once a horseman overtook them, riding furiously; shouted something which none could catch, and was gone in darkness. Their road led them over the downs and through the heather by the little station of Bibracte to Calleva, where four roads joined; and on through the level and open country around Corinium, where, to south and west, among shaded groves, they caught glimpses of palaces and stately homes. So, in time, they came to the scarred hills of the great iron district of the west.

At each station where they stopped for rest and refreshment on their three days' journey, Wardo was taken aside by strangers, who talked earnestly. "The state of the country," he told his men, with his tongue in his cheek. Most of these strangers were fair-skinned Saxons, like himself; indeed, the number of these was significant. Wardo, coming from the south, had to tell what he knew of recent happenings there. This was not much; his interlocutors, it would seem, knew more than he. Especially did they inquire to whom he belonged, and what he was doing with his charges.

They crossed the Sabrina in a flat-bottomed barge, and were in Britannia Secunda, the ancient country of the Silures. Here, from Uriconium to Glevum on the Sabrina, and south to Leucarum on the Via Julia, were scattered the iron mines from which their owners drew inexhaustible wealth. The one controlled by Eudemius lay five Roman miles west of the river, and was reckoned one of the largest and richest in the section. In it were said to be employed over five hundred men, mostly prisoners from the various estates of Eudemius, and overseers.

VII

THE gallery, pitch-black and narrow, was dotted with moving lights which wandered here and there, each a restless will-o'-the-wisp. It was very damp, and from somewhere came a monotonous drip of water. The tapping of picks sounded incessantly out of the darkness, and occasionally there were hoarse voices raised in wanton curses or harsh commands. Shores of heavy timbers supported the sides and roof of the tunnel, looming grotesquely gigantic as some passing light touched them; this was the newest of the workings, and so far the richest.

A light and a clanking of chains drew near down the tunnel; and eight men, chained like mules, and loaded with baskets of ore, came painfully over the uneven ground to the chamber of the main shaft, where a second gang waited to unload them. Each party was in charge of its own overseer, who carried a whip and went armed to the teeth. It was easier to use men than to lower animals into the galleries for the work; besides, the superintendent wished to save his horses.

The shaft, through which men ascended and descended by means of long series of ladders, opened out into a

chamber, roughly circular in shape, from which the galleries branched off in all directions. It ran through four different levels, the top one, and the oldest, something over fifteen feet underground, the lowest not quite seventy. On each level the ore was handled in the same way; brought to the central shaft in baskets by men, and carried to the surface by other men who spent their lives toiling up and down the endless ladders, with baskets strapped upon their backs. It was primitive work, and barbarous, but it at least served the purpose of getting rid, in short order, of insubordinate slaves. Earth from the tunnellings was treated in like fashion; and every timber used for building up the walls was lowered from level to level by ropes. Accidents were many and appalling. Sometimes a huge stick slipped from its lashings and crashed downward into the bowels of the earth, knocking men off the ladders in its course as though they had been flies. Sometimes a ladder gave way, hurling screaming wretches into eternity; sometimes men were buried in sudden falls of earth. Also the ladder men, who necessarily went unchained, died like rats from heart trouble brought on by their constant climbing; and others were to be driven into their places.

The overseer of the second gang watched the loading of the baskets strapped to his men's backs, noted the time on his clepsydra, which stood on a near-by ledge, and started the men one by one, in quick succession. He knew to a fraction of time how long the trip to the surface should take, but to make assurance more sure, each carrier, on his return, brought a check stamped with the exact minute of arrival by the overseer who had received the ore above. If this check showed that more

time had been consumed than was necessary for the ascent and descent, there was punishment swift and sure for that luckless one who had lingered.

The chained slaves, with their empty baskets, filed off again into the gallery from which they had come.

The shaft chamber, the centre of its floor pierced by the black hole leading down to the next and lowest level, was lighted dimly by lamps and candles standing upon shelves which jutted from the earthen walls. From all the galleries radiating from it, files of men, staggering under weighted baskets, kept coming to be relieved of their loads by their unchained fellow-workers. Every moment a man started up the ladder, clawing his way at top speed out of sight in the darkness of the shaft, like a grotesque, huge monkey. No lashing, no punishment, could get more than four such round trips out of a man without a period of rest equal to at least two trips. When it came to this point, he would merely lose his hold from sheer exhaustion and fall from the ladder. And when picked up by the crew at the bottom of the shaft, he was fit for nothing but to be thrown like carrion into the nearest unused pit, walled in with a half-dozen shovelfuls of earth, and left at last to rest.

The overseer by the shaft glanced at his water-clock, raised a reed to his lips, and blew a shrill whistle. From level to level and from gallery to gallery this was taken up and repeated in fainter cadences, and with it the insistent tapping of the picks ceased. One by one men began to hurry forth from the galleries, making for the ladders which led to the world of air and sunlight.

Nicanor came from one of the branching tunnels, a pick over his shoulder, stripped to the waist and grimed

with sweat and dirt, his lean chest and arms thrown out against the murky candle-light. He was all bone and skin and muscle, hard as nails; but it was the dead, springless hardness which comes to an athlete badly overtrained, not the resilient firmness which denotes good condition. He laid his pick on the ground near the entrance of the tunnel and went to the ladder. Even his tread had lost something of its catlike lightness; he walked wearily, his shoulders bowed. He gave his number to the overseer, who barely waited to record it in his tablet, with the time he had stopped work, before starting up the ladder for his half-hour's intermission. Nicanor, suddenly alert, ran back into the tunnel, reappeared with a bag, which he held carefully, and started up the ladder also. But at the next level, thirty feet above, he stopped, instead of keeping on to the surface.

In the shaft-chamber here were a dozen and odd men gathered, but there seemed to be no overseer among them. A ring had formed about a space on the floor under one of the lamps; men craned over the shoulders of those in front of them. One saw Nicanor and shouted at him.

"Well come, friend! We wait for you and that pretty pet of yours!"

He was a short man who spoke, with arms immensely long and hairy, and a seamed face of a shortness out of all proportion to its width, as though crown of head and chin had been pressed together in a vise. Of the others, all were more or less as black as Ethiopians with grime; many were shaven and mutilated, with lips slit or an ear gone. Some were branded; and the backs of many were scored with the marks of floggings, some long healed, others red and raw. No fouler-mouthed crew

of desperadoes might be found within the island; doomed here for many offences, they still committed the offence of living. Nicanor was greeted with a chorus of jests and exclamations.

"Hurry, son, our time is not so long as thy legs."

"Where 's thy plaything? Balbus here is ready with his toy to make ribbons of that ugly beast of thine."

"Let us see now whose boasts will stand repeating."

"I have two asses on thee, Balbus!" one cried, and jingled two copper coins in his horny palms. Coins were produced from rags by those lucky enough to own them; others wagered their picks or spades. One bet his sandals on Nicanor's chances against a man who was willing to lose his shirt.

Nicanor pushed his way into the ring, where Balbus, grasping a large black rat, knelt on one knee, ready to loose the strip of cloth that bound its muzzle. Nicanor shook his gray rat out of the bag, and untied it.

Men had found such contests cheap as well as exciting, since rats were over plentiful, and when pitted against their own kind would fight to the death. This form of amusement was widespread among soldiers and the lower classes; and there were men who made a business of training rats and selling them or matching them against all comers. These beasts were carefully bred from approved fighting stock, and often brought sums preposterously large.

Balbus let go his black with a yell as Nicanor released the gray, and the two beasts leaped at each other and closed in the middle of the ring, rolling over. Men clawed over one another's shoulders to see better; at opposite sides of the ring the owners squatted, each

urging on his animal with hisses and clapping hands. The light from the smoking lamps and candles fell upon the crowd, throwing into relief brutal faces, and eyes gleaming wolfishly, savagely eager for blood.

"The black is on top, the black wins!" one cried, hot-eyed with excitement, and leaned further and still further into the ring. Another pulled him back.

"Nay, fool — the gray — look at him, holy gods! My money on the gray! See, the black bleeds — the gray hath bit him in the throat. Macte! At him again, gray-beard! Lad, a brand-new knife is thine if thou 'lt win for me those sandals of Chilo's! Ah — habet!"

The ring tossed with excitement. Bets were roared from brazen throats; those on the outskirts of the crowd fought to get a look. And in the open centre of the tumult a furry ball rolled and bit and squealed and made bloody sport for those who gloated over it.

A yell, half exultation, half anger, broke from a dozen throats. The black rat tore himself loose and fled back toward Balbus; the gray stood in the middle of the ring, triumphant. Both were badly mangled and drenched with blood, but the black was craven. The followers of the gray roared their triumph. Balbus seized his rat and flung him back into the fight, almost on top of the gray, which instantly fastened on him.

But, plainly, the black had had enough. It could be seen that he no longer attacked; was all on the defensive, trying only to escape. Again he broke away and crawled toward safety. The ring howled with mingled derision and delight. Balbus, cursing, his face congested with rage, again threw him back, and again the vicious gray fell upon him with teeth and claws.

"Give thy sandals quickly, Chilo!" a voice shouted above the racket. "The black is down!"

He was, and the gray on top of him, bloodily victorious. "*Peractum est!*" Nicanor shouted, in the language of the arena; and sprang to his feet and caught up his bloody pet and held him high in triumph. But Balbus, his face aflame with fury, strode to where the black rat lay still twitching, and stamped the heel of his iron-shod sandal upon its head with such force that its brains and blood were spattered.

"It was no fair fight!" he cried, turning on those who jeered him. "That gray beast wrought by magic. Thou hast played a trick!" He shook his fist in Nicanor's face, glaring.

Nicanor backed away with a laugh. It taunted Balbus beyond endurance; he lunged forward, his fists clenched. In an instant there had been battle, on which men would have bet as eagerly as on the combat ended. But there was a sudden clamor of guards' whistles; a rush from the ladders, and overseers fell upon the crowd with hissing lashes that left their marks on backs and thighs. The ring broke up, as men fled like sheep and were whipped back to their posts.

Soon there was nothing heard but the endless tapping of picks, the thud of falling earth, and the voices of overseers and the foremen of the gangs. But Balbus, each time he passed with laden basket the spot where Nicanor stood tirelessly wielding his heavy pick, scowled at him blackly and muttered oaths of vengeance. For he was of those who must be taught, by many ungentle lessons, that one must know how to lose as well as how to win.

THE NIGHT AND THE DAWNING

BOOK V

Book V

THE NIGHT AND THE DAWNING

I

HEN Wardo had delivered his charges to the superintendent of the mine and received a receipt for them from him, he started back, with his assistants, on his homeward journey. But at Bibracte, where they would leave the main road and turn due south toward the villa, ten Roman miles away, he bade his men wait for him at the station until his return. Instead of striking across country for the villa, he kept along the main road, riding swiftly and steadily, as one who pursues a definite plan. He crossed the Tamesis at Pontes, after a night's rest, and at evening of the next day rode through the marsh-ford at Thorney.

Here he met with one who also was on horseback, splashed to the waist with mud, for even the high-roads were heavy with the springtime thawing out of the frost. He was muffled in a cloak, and his spurs were blood-stained. He hailed Wardo in Latin tinged strongly with a foreign accent.

"Can you tell me, friend, if there be an inn in this place where soft beds and good food may be found?"

Wardo was moved to curiosity.

"For yourself?" he asked, spurring up to the stranger's side.

"Nay, for my lord and his wife and daughter. I am sent ahead to find lodging for them. They are on the road to Rutupiæ, to take ship for Gaul, and travel by way of Londinium, where my lord hath affairs to settle; but the women have given out and vow that they will go no farther. So do the chickens break for cover when the hawk swoops."

His voice was slightly contemptuous. He turned his face, covered with a wiry red beard, upon Wardo. His eyes, small and light, glinted from a network of wrinkles under reddish brows.

"You are no Roman," he said abruptly.

"Why, no," said Wardo, somewhat surprised, "I am Saxon."

"Like myself," said the stranger, grandly. "Men call me Wulf, the son of Wulf."

"There is an inn here," said Wardo, without returning information. "I will show you, if you like. It is kept by Christians, and it is clean."

"Then it will be poor," Wulf grumbled, "and the wine will not be fit for decent men."

"There you are wrong," said Wardo. "It is where my lord Eudemius stops with his train when he passeth through here."

"So!" Wulf's glance held awakening curiosity. "The lord Eudemius of the white villa south of Bibracte?"

"That same," said Wardo, with the pride of a servant in a well-known master.

"One hears tales of that house these days," said Wulf, casually. "See, friend, when I have made arrangement for my lords and brought them hither, is there not a place where we might find a mouthful of good Saxon ale?"

Wardo hesitated.

"I fear my time is too short," he answered. "Even now I am late —"

"For the maid who awaits thee?" said Wulf, with a chuckle. "Well, I'll not keep thee then. But this much I'll tell thee now. When my lord sails with his familia from Rutupiæ, it will be without Wulf, the son of Wulf. I have it in mind to stay here longer; there will be fat pickings for Saxons by and by, when these Roman lords are crowded out. Hast heard that?"

"Ay," said Wardo. "I have heard it."

"And it is in my mind also to try for some of these same fat pickings," said Wulf, and laughed. "Why not I, as well as any man?"

"If you wait for these Roman lords to be crowded out, as you have it," said Wardo, "it will be some time before these fat pickings fall to your lot."

"Perhaps not so long time as one might think," Wulf retorted. "Hast heard of what happened at Anderida?"

"Oh, ay," said Wardo. "The lord governor of Anderida fled to the house of my lord."

Wulf's glance became all at once as keen as a gaze-hound which sights its prey.

"Had he his son, called Felix, with him, a cat-eyed rascal, who was wounded?"

"Yes," said Wardo, quite proud to tell his news. "And on the evening of the feast the lord governor and his men rode away again. But he left his son behind him."

A gleam shot into Wulf's light eyes.

"So?" he said pleasantly. "Perhaps, then, this son Felix is still a guest of your lord?"

"Ay, so he is," Wardo returned. "Which is to say that he was there when I rode away, and that is now six days ago." In his turn he shot a glance at the red-beard from his steely eyes. "Now why should you ask these things, friend gossip? What concern is this son Felix of yours?"

"Merely that all men like to know what is happening these days. What else? But know you how the man got his wound? Nay, I thought not. Perhaps you know that the leader of that band of Saxons and those insurgent Romans, called Evor, was slain in that affair at Anderida?"

"No," said Wardo. "I did not know that. Who slew him?"

"Felix," answered Wulf.

Wardo looked somewhat startled.

"Then this is why he remained behind!" he exclaimed. His face awoke to a new thought. "Why, death of a dog! if this Evor's men pass through the Silva Anderida and hear that this lord Felix is at the villa, there may be trouble for my lord."

"Ay," said Wulf. There was a certain grimness in his tone. "The son of Evor hath sworn to have the blood of his father's slayer; therefore it is quite likely."

"How come you to know these things?" Wardo de-

manded. The stranger's manner was always casual to indifference, and Wardo was not over keen to see what he was not looking for. His question came more from curiosity than from suspicion, although of this there was something also.

"News travels fast these days," Wulf said briefly. "I got it from a carter who saw something of the business. I hope you do not think that I was there? Now where is this inn of yours? I must find it and hasten back to my lord."

By now they had reached a cobbled street no wider than an alley, running at right angles to the main street, which led from ford to ford. Down this they rode abreast, and there was room for no other horseman to pass them. Bare-shouldered girls laughed down at them from upper windows; bent crones hobbled from door to door with baskets of fish or produce; children and dogs scampered from under their horses' feet. The evening sunshine fell in long slanting shadows down the dusty street, stabbing shafts of golden light into dark doorways.

Wardo saw Wulf to the door of the "cleanest inn on Thorney," watched him enter, and wheeled his horse. Back again then he rode, with no more than a glance for the long-haired girls who leaned to him from windows, and with a recklessness which sent the dogs and children flying. He turned into the main street, back toward the marsh-ford, and galloped the length of it until he reached a house which stood the third from the end, next to a half-burnt ruin where cattle had been stalled, with a narrow door in a blank wall which betrayed nothing.

Before this he flung his horse back upon its haunches, leaped lightfoot to the ground, and hammered on the

door. The wicket was opened a space and closed; then the door was opened. He entered, and it closed after him.

Two hours later Wulf, the son of Wulf, came down the street in the dim twilight, on foot, walking with a swagger. Out of the saddle he was seen to be short and stunted, with legs badly bowed. His breath proclaimed loudly that he had stopped at sundry wine-shops on the way. He was passing unconcernedly, when a whinny from a horse standing before a door caught his ear, and he stopped.

"Light of my eyes, I've seen this beast before," he muttered, going closer to look. "Why, sure, he's the horse of that long-legged yellow-head of mine. Ay, here's the brand I noted on the shoulder. So — we shall see what we shall see."

He knocked boldly upon the door. The wicket opened.

"What will you?" a woman's voice asked from within.

"A friend of mine entered here a little time ago," Wulf began glibly.

"Many have entered here," said the voice. "Who is your friend?"

Wulf's laugh covered a moment of embarrassment.

"Why, in truth, I do not care to name his name aloud," he said. "If you will let me in, I will see if he be still here."

The door opened. Wulf stepped inside, confronting a tall girl, full-throated, long-limbed, with face of purest Grecian outline. Wulf's single keen glance took in the girl, her attire, and the room behind her. His manner changed at once.

"Your friend may not be here," said the girl.

Wulf advanced.

"In truth, I shall not miss him overmuch. Might a weary man purchase food, and a drop of wine, and perhaps a lodging for the night?" He jingled coins in the pouch which hung at his leathern belt.

The girl eyed him.

"You know that you may," she said, very wearily, and crossed the room and opened a door into an inner chamber.

Here the air was heavy with the smell of food and the fumes of wine. There were many people in the room, — men and women; yet in the first glance he cast around Wulf saw his long-legged yellow-head reclining at ease upon a couch, his arm around a slim golden beauty who sat beside him. In his free hand Wardo clutched a brazen beaker, which the girl filled constantly from a fat-sided ampulla on her knee. From time to time she stroked back the fair hair on his temples, and each time he raised his half-drunken head to kiss her shapely arm.

Wulf nodded to one or two men in the room, his face betraying no surprise that he found them there. He bade the dark-haired Greek girl bring wine and two cups. While she was gone a man and a woman slipped away through one of the several side doors, leaving vacant the place next to Wardo. At once Wulf possessed himself of it, without glancing at his neighbor. The Greek returned, and he pulled her down beside him, had her drink with him, kissed her arms and hands with his red-bearded mouth, made love to her with jests and laughter unnecessarily loud. Soon Wardo's attention was caught. He sat upright, steadying himself on the girl's arm, and looked across at Wulf.

"Not too drunk to talk, I hope!" Wulf muttered.

"Holla, Wulf, son of Wulf!" Wardo called, in a voice somewhat thickened by wine. "How didst find the way to Chloris?"

"Who but knows the house of Chloris?" said Wulf, pleasantly. "I did not look to find thee here."

"I? Oh, I am always here. Is it not so, Sada? Am I not always with thee, girl of my heart?"

"Ah, not always!" said the golden-haired girl. "Not so often as I would have thee."

"Drink with us, thou and thy lady," Wulf invited.

The golden-haired girl leaned over.

"Nay, Wardo, thou hast drunk enough. Already the wine is in thy head," she murmured; and Wulf, keen-eared, caught the words.

But Wardo was already holding out his beaker, which the Greek filled at a sign from Wulf.

"Nay, sweet, my head is iron," said Wardo, half indulgent, half in scorn. "Here I pledge thee, friend Wulf, the son of Wulf: 'A long life and a rousing one, a quick death and a merry one!'" He drank deeply.

"That is the motto of my lord master," quoth Wulf. "And light of my eyes, but he lives up to it! There is a man who spends gold as wine floweth through a *colum.*"

"Ay, but promise you my lord spends faster!" said Wardo, with great pride.

"So?" said Wulf. He gave the Greek a sign to keep the wine-cups filled. "Then must he indeed be wealthy. In truth, I have heard something of a feast he gives at his villa even now."

"The marriage feast of our lady Varia and the lord Marius," said Wardo.

"Men say that the gifts are of a richness beyond all counting," said Wulf. "Of course, being there, thou couldst see it all, and judge."

"Ay," said Wardo. "I saw it all.'

With the wine, his tongue began to wag. His eyes sparkled; he drained his cup and set it down with a thump. "In that house is the ransom of an emperor, ay, of forty emperors!" he cried. "No lord in the island could gather such hoard of treasure, not even yours, Wulf the son of Wulf, and I shall fight you if you say so! No man hath seen such jewels, such vessels of gold and silver. There be a million golden cups set about with rubies; an hundred thousand vases of silver; and every woman hath a fan of gold, set with gems. And the jewels he hath loaded on our lady — man, thine eyes have never seen the like! She wears a girdle that blazes like that pharos at Dubræ, which I have seen; she goes belted with flame that dazzles the eyes. On her arms are an hundred bracelets — "

"Of a truth, I do think the wine is in thine eyes, Wardo mine," said Wulf. His laugh was careless, but his eyes were keen.

Wardo flushed angrily.

"Not so!" he cried. "For these six months and more have not goods been coming to us from all the world?" He boasted vaingloriously.

Wulf nodded.

"I have heard that that is so. There must indeed be great store of plunder — of wealth within thy master's house."

"Verily!" said Wardo, somewhat appeased. He told all that he knew, and much that he did not know, fired with

eagerness to impress upon this casual stranger the magnificence of the lord whom he served. From mere loquacity he became argumentative, finally quarrelsome. But Sada wound white arms about his neck and soothed him.

But by now the wine was reaching Wulf's head also, although compared to Wardo he was sober.

"That house of thy lord's will be fat pickings for the men of Evor when they come to claim the blood of Felix for the blood which he hath shed. Light of my eyes! it would be worth —"

"What is this thou sayest?" Wardo demanded. He strove to sit upright, but fell back against Sada in drunken laxity. "Speak louder, thou! There be a million bees that buzz within my head."

Wulf waved the women away.

"Leave us, pretty ones, awhile. Is it the first time men have left your arms to discuss affairs?"

Eunice, the tall Greek, went willingly, but Sada clung to her lover and would not go.

"Nay, I 'll not leave thee. Speak as ye will — what is it to me? I have no call to remember."

"See, friend, I like thee, and I see no reason why we should not be comrades, for the better gain of both," said Wulf, with all frankness. "We be of one nation, as against these haughty Roman lords who soon must yield to us the field. Oh, but I long for a half-hundred kindred souls to take with me this chance! What chance, say you? — the chance of gain, of wealth and fortune past all dreams. Why should they have all, these haughty lords, while we have nothing? Why should not something of their wealth profit us?"

Wardo shook his muddled head solemnly over this problem old as the ages.

"They have gained it," he muttered, with an air of profound wisdom.

"They have gained it, quotha! Ay, truly, but how? By rapine, taxation, wars, plunder! Therefore why shall not others use like means? If it be fair for them, I say it is fair for us!" Wulf brought down his fist upon the table with a blow that made the cups rattle. "Therefore now is our chance, say I! All is confusion; the lords fight amongst themselves; we are slowly gaining the ground they lose — let us also gain wealth with it!"

He discoursed at great length, repeating himself incessantly, losing himself in endless trains of argument which nobody contradicted. It was not very clear what he wanted, even to himself, it would seem. But he was quite convinced that existing conditions were altogether wrong and something should at once be done about it. What the something should be he did not take the trouble to state. Wardo dozed peacefully, his head on Sada's breast. No one in the room paid the least attention to them.

Wardo roused, in time, reaching out blindly for his cup, and caught a word of Wulf's oration:

". . . Gold for the taking. Had I but a half hundred — "

"Gold! That is a good thing to have!" Wardo muttered. He pulled Sada's head down to him. "When I have gold, I shall buy thee from thy mistress. Wilt go with me?"

The girl's fair face flushed.

"Ay, thou knowest I will go," she answered. "Wheresoever thou wilt take me."

"If thou wouldst have gold, my friend, come with me, and it shall be thine in plenty," Wulf cried eagerly.

Wardo looked at him with awakening interest.

"How so?"

"Thus," said Wulf. "We shall take for ourselves what should be ours by right, what is wrung from us by infamous greed. What would suffice us would not be missed by those who have more than plenty, yet even this they will not give us. We must get it for ourselves."

Wardo nodded.

"That will be a good thing to do. Where shall we find it?"

"Why should we show mercy to them?" Wulf declaimed. "What mercy have they shown us? Do they not grind us into the earth; do we not pay in sweat and blood for their idle pleasures? And with all of this, have they not sought to force us to our knees before any new god they choose to perch upon a pedestal? I, for one, will not worship because one man says 'Bow down!' And I do not care who knows it. I am as good as the next man, and I will have my rights."

Wardo, who had never heard anything like this before, was impressed deeply.

"I say so too," he exclaimed with great earnestness. "Let us take what is our own. Then if thou hast rights, *I* have rights also. And I will have my rights!"

"Of course! I see thou art a clever fellow, and a man after mine own heart. Drink more wine. See, then, I will tell thee a thing. This lord of thine, who oppresses thee and vouchsafes thee no rights, who wrings from thee

what should be thine — thou hast him in thy hand. He hath committed a grievous crime in giving shelter to a murderer. Does he think that his guest will not be demanded of him by those whom that guest hath wronged? For this does he not deserve punishment?"

Wardo nodded, much bewildered at the rapid changes of subject he was called upon to follow. Gods, gold, oppression, murderers, and all at once — and his mind was taxed with one thing at a time.

"Then I see plainly that thou art chosen to execute justice and to claim thy full reward!" cried Wulf, in sonorous prophecy.

"Oh, no — not on my lord!" said Wardo, firmly. "Or, look you, it would be I who should be executed." And chuckled at his cleverness in discovering this point.

"You do not understand," Wulf assured him, patiently. "There is no danger in it for you — none at all. All you will do is to answer these questions I shall ask you now. Tell me then, first, how many men can your lord summon to — let us say, protect this lord Felix when his enemies find him out?"

"With his familia, and the coloni and casarii who own him lord, he can call out near a thousand; though it would take time to gather all of these from his estates. But, my friend, how may the enemies of this lord Felix find him out when they know not where he is?"

Again he chuckled at the point which he had made.

"True," Wulf admitted smoothly. "I but suppose the case. For they are roaming far and wide, and if they find him not, it will not be for lack of searching."

"Now I must tell my lord of this, that he may be prepared," Wardo muttered. He pressed his hands to

his temples. "My head is buzzing with your questions, and I am weary, for I have ridden far. Pray you, let me sleep."

"Not yet!" Wulf said hastily, in alarm, as Wardo's head sank lower. "See, friend, you are trusted in your lord's household, I doubt not. Is there a rear door, even a very little one, of which you know where the key is hung?"

Wardo jerked his head upright, his eyes half closed.

"What is this you say?" he asked angrily. "What would you with a — a — little key?"

"Give me a key, and I will give you as much gold as you can carry on your back," said Wulf, low and eagerly, his caution forgotten in the fever of his greed.

Wardo opened his eyes with effort to their fullest extent and stared at him. His voice was thick and stuttering.

"A key? to my lord's house? *Deae matres!* What should I do that for? I am my lord's man!"

"You shall come to no harm!" Wulf urged desperately, fearful lest the man fall asleep before he could gain what he would. But at last Wardo understood. He staggered off the couch, clutching at Sada's shoulder for support, reeling and blind with drink, and towered over Wulf.

"Look you, sirrah!" he shouted, so that men turned to look at him in surprise, "I am no traitor to my lord! I am his man, blood and body, and his will is my law and his faith is my faith. I have served him loyally, and so shall I continue to serve. What is this you would have me do? Turn rascal, even as you? Holy gods, I 'll show you, knave and varlet —"

Unexpectedly he stooped, and caught Wulf by the collar of his tunic. Wulf struggled, but Wardo dragged him across the floor, shook him, and flung him outside the door and slammed it. He turned to Sada, demanding her applause with drunken self-satisfaction at his prowess, dropped on the nearest couch in abject prostration, and was instantly asleep.

After uncounted hours he roused, to find Sada dashing cold water in his face and calling his name in great distress. They were alone in the room, and the sun was shining through the window.

"What hast thou?" Wardo grumbled. "Let me sleep!"

She shook his shoulder.

"Hasten, Wardo, and undo the mischief thou hast done while there may yet be time. For hours I have tried to wake thee!"

"Harm? What harm?"

"Thou hast told that evil man all he would know of thy lord's defences, of the treasures within his house, and of the lord called Felix who is there. And when thou wert asleep he, being drunken also, did tell Eunice, who bade him render payment for his wine, that it would not take long to send word to these men who search for this lord Felix, and that then he would give her gold and jewels in plenty. Hasten, Wardo, and warn thy lord, or it will be too late!" She wrung her hands.

"*I* have done this thing?" Wardo exclaimed, pointing a finger at his own broad chest. "Nay, girl, thou 'rt joking!"

"Never that!" cried Sada, with impatience. "Thou wert drunk, I tell thee, and he got out of thee what he would. Thy lord is betrayed, and through thee!"

"Betrayed!" The word stabbed through his dull sodden wits and sent him starting from the couch, his face gray with horror. He sank back with a groan of sheer physical sickness, and tried again, his teeth set, the sweat starting on his forehead. His legs trembled under him, and his eyes were dazed, but he got to the door and leaned against it, his hands over his face.

"If I have done this thing thou sayest," he said hoarsely, "my life is rightly forfeit, and I shall give it into my lord's hand. I do not understand — I am my lord's man, and loyal." He turned to her in stunned appeal. "Sada girl, am I drunk, that thou shouldst fill me with this madness?"

Her eyes filled with tears.

"Nay," she answered sadly. "Thou art sober now."

The fresh air aided what the shock of her words had begun. He mounted, heavily, yet in feverish desperate haste, whirled his horse about with scarcely a word of farewell to her, and struck the heavy spurs deep. The beast sprang forward, with a shower of sparks from the cobbles.

Sada, returning from the door, ran into the arms of a thin slip of a girl, white-faced and with burning eyes, who caught her and cried desperately:

"What said he of Nicanor? What have they done to him? Does he live still?"

"Peace, child!" said Sada. "Now he hath thought for nothing but this thing which he hath done, and I with him. But last night he did tell me that this friend of his, thy lover, hath been sent to the mines, and that he had been of the guard."

"And I not to know!" cried Eldris, bitterly. "He

might have told me how he looked and what he said; and now he hath gone, and I may not ask him — "

"Ay, and I think that I shall never see him more. For surely his lord will slay him when he knows what he hath done," said Sada.

Suddenly she put her head on Eldris's shoulder and wept; and Eldris, by way of showing sympathy, having love sorrows of her own, put her arms about her and wept also.

II

THE lord Eudemius laid himself upon his couch of ebon and carved ivory with the air of a man whose work has been well done. Midnight was long gone, the great house was quiet, and the desire of his heart stood forth in fulfilment. He had a son; his dying house was propped with fresh strength and vigor, and the gods of the shades might claim him when they would. One week ago had the marriage been celebrated. Each night since there had been feasts, with at every feast new dishes contrived, new sports and entertainments offered, new souvenirs of price distributed, to provide the jaded senses of his guests with fresh gratification. Now the festivities were nearly over; already some of the lords had gone. Among them was Count Pomponius, with his Wardens of the Eastern Marches, for it was reported that Saxons were again harrying and burning along the coast.

In the mellow light of the bronze lamps the face of Eudemius showed softer, less inscrutable, with eyes more kindly. On it was great weariness, but also a great content. He put forth a hand and touched the bell on the stand beside his couch. The strain under which he had

labored was lifting; he could afford to relax. The silvery tinkle of sound had scarcely fallen into the quiet of the room when Mycon, chief of the eunuchs, entered, parting the curtains, with his arms crossed before his face.

"Bid Cyrrus bring hither his lyre," said Eudemius.

Many and many a day had gone since their dark lord had given such command; the cries and groans of his slaves had been music enough for him. Mycon bowed in silence and went. Before five minutes had fled, word of the miracle had gone from end to end of the ranks of those whose duty it was to watch the house by night; and weary men and women smiled and blessed their little lady, who perhaps had bought for them the dawn of a happier day.

Cyrrus the musician entered, a slender Greek boy; and the low light was caught by the silver frame of the lyre he bore, and rippled on its strings. He put himself where he should not be too much under his lord's eyes, and played; and as though the instinct of his art had taught him what to do, the music he played was plaintive and low and soothing. Eudemius lay with arms behind his head and stared at the painted ceiling where naked nereids sported. By slow degrees, still more his hard face softened; under the spell of the music and of his thoughts his thin lips parted to a smile. Slow and soft the melody rippled into the quiet room, singing of placid waters smiling in the sun, with lilies floating on their bosom, of young fleecy clouds and tender shadows. Again it changed, with dropping notes like tears, and whispered of the yearning hopes of men, of world pain and heart's peace, of longings unfulfilled and

prayers unanswered. Two tears, the slow and difficult tears of age, stole down Eudemius's gray furrowed cheeks and lost themselves in his silken pillow.

"My child!" he whispered. "My little, little child!"

In that moment the pathetic unloved beauty of her came nearer to touching him than ever before. He forgot that he had sold her into bondage; forgot that her happiness might not lie along the road of his. She had done what he would have her do; she had been a dutiful daughter, and at the last he rejoiced in her.

Varia, at that hour, sat alone in her chamber, awaiting the coming of her lord. There were traces of tears upon her cheeks; her lids drooped with weariness and sleep. They had taken away her robes of state, in which she had sat by Marius's side through interminable hours of merrymaking, when a thousand eyes had stared at her from a swimming sea of lights, and she had shrunk and trembled beneath their glances. They had put upon her a thin robe of Seres silk of rose, with no ornament or jewel upon it. With bare neck and arms, and warm white throat bending with the drooping flower of her head, she looked more than ever a child. To all that they had done to her throughout the endless days of festival, she had submitted docilely, dazed, if she could have told it, by the excitement of those around her. Faces, scenes, events, had passed before her in a blurred confusion, in which she could neither think nor see clearly. She had repeated words of whose meaning she had no knowledge; she had drunk wine and only been distressed that a drop had fallen upon her royal robe; she had broken a cake of bread and only wondered why her little black slave was not there to gather up the crumbs. Of her lord she

had seen little, save upon one fearful night of which the memory still sent burning shudders through her frightened heart. She drifted upon a gray sea of loneliness, torn from her old shelters, given nothing to which she might turn and cling.

She got up from the chair covered with rugs of white fur, in which she had been nestling like a great rose, and went to the window which looked upon the garden, all her movements restless, like some shy creature caged. Now the garden lay deserted, desolate in the mistiness of the moonlight. She held her arms out to it in vague yearning.

"I would I were out there now!" she cried softly. "Where the trees whisper and the lake sleeps, and none but may hear the music of one voice. He is gone — he is gone from me, and I know not where they have taken him. And I long for him; I would I could creep into his arms and rest upon his breast forever, for then I should not be frightened. Now I am left alone — I know not where to turn for very fear — my head it burneth and my hands are cold. And I fear to be alone — and the night is dark — so dark!"

A gust of wind rose slowly through the trees, like the flapping of unseen wings, and Varia shivered. The moon was now and again obscured under vast driving clouds; through the gloom trees massed themselves into blots of sinister shadow. When the wind's voice died, the earth hung silent, in suspense, so that Varia held her breath in sheer unconscious attunement to it. In the garden she saw a black shape flying with quick darting swoops. She knew it for a bat, but her eyes dilated with nervous fright. It was so very still — in all the

world there was no sound at all. She glanced fearfully over her shoulder. Even the lighted room was not reassuring; it also held the same waiting stillness which she dared not break by so much as a sigh. Only the flame from the perfumed lamps flickered wanly in the draught. Her wide eyes fixed themselves upon the window, striving to pierce the mystery of the dark without; she yielded helplessly to the sway of the vast unnamed forces around her, a child frightened in the night. She sank upon the floor by the window, hiding her face.

"Nerissa!" she called in a small and shaken voice, and wept, more frightened at the little cry drowned in the tense stillness. Never had she been so alone in her life; never so frightened. She clung to the window, crouched as small as possible, not daring to look up.

And across the night a sound grew out of the void and came to her, and her face blanched, and she caught at her throat with shaking hands. Faint, elusive, coming from very far away, to be felt rather than heard, it was now like the distant trampling of the feet of many men, now like the rush of water over stones, now like the whisper of the wind in trees, scarcely a thing apart from the silence which enfolded and engulfed it. It was a voice from nowhere, warning her straining senses of unknown and sinister things to come.

"Why, sweetheart, art hiding from me?" a voice said almost at her ear, and Varia, taken unawares and startled out of all control, screamed aloud and shrank lower into her corner, sobbing violently.

Marius stooped over her and took her hands away from her face.

"What is wrong?" he demanded. "Why these tears, little wife?"

"It was so dark!" Varia wailed. "And there was no sound at all, and then there was a sound —"

She wept again, her fresh terrors submerging even her fear of him.

Marius picked her up in his arms, carried her to the couch, and laid her there, and a moment she clung to his hand desperately. He was something human to hold to; so she would have clung to Nerissa, or even to Mycon.

"Afraid of the dark!" Marius scoffed gently. "Well, I am here now, and there is nothing shall harm thee. Of a truth, I did begin to think the feast would never have an end. The more I burned to be done with it and come to thee, the more the minutes dragged. I pictured thee, awaiting me here in thy secret bower; thy flushing face and the veiling shadow of thy hair, thy denying hands and averted glances — and thy father's guests might well have thought me a love-sick fool, thinking of nothing but his secret hope that his mistress might prove kind."

Varia sat upright on the couch and put her feet upon the floor, and his eyes followed the gracious outlines of her form beneath its drapery of rose. She pushed her hair back from her eyes and looked at him. Slow crimson spread from throat to brow; her glance wavered and fell. Quite suddenly she put both hands to her face, hiding her eyes from his, and turned her face away. It was a gesture of a child, infinitely touching, all-betraying in its pure artlessness. He started toward her, his dark eyes keen; and she sat quite still, passive to this fate of hers from which flight no longer might avail her.

But with the touch of his hand upon her shoulder there came a soft insistent knocking at the door.

Marius smothered a curse and strode to open it. Mycon stood upon the threshold, and in the lamplight his face showed gray. He stammered like one caught in guilt.

"Lord, thy pardon! There is trouble without, and the master sends to ask my lord's presence. We be encompassed by barbarians who have crept upon us."

"Tell thy lord I come," said Marius. Varia was forgotten; scarcely had the slave vanished down the corridor when Marius was after him, leaving his bride alone.

Now in the villa were to be heard the first sounds of people aroused from sleep to find themselves in the midst of unknown dangers. Voices, frightened and impatient, echoed back and forth along the corridors; lights gleamed across the courts. Men and women, half dressed, began to appear, questioning feverishly, delivering themselves of theories to any who would listen.

"They say that if he will surrender Felix they will depart at once in peace."

"How came they to know that he was here? Who told them?"

"He will not surrender Felix —"

"If he does not — holy gods! — we shall all be slain and plundered."

And above all, a woman's voice:

"I will not stay to be robbed! I shall leave this house at once!"

In the great court men had gathered about Eudemius and Marius, who held hasty consultation. Felix, pale, nursing carefully his wounded arm, was on the outskirts

of the group. His face all unconsciously betrayed his state of mind. It was white and flaccid; and at every yelp of the hounds outside who clamored for his life, he cringed and quivered. But he was very quiet, and the talk surged over his head as though he had not been there. Men cast glances of scorn unveiled upon him, but he was long past caring what they thought. He wanted his life; his eyes craved protection. In his face was a desperate dumb reliance on the pride and honor of Eudemius, which would not allow him to surrender one who had claimed his hospitality; craven himself, he yet recognized and centred all his faith upon this stern and scornful pride which must uphold its traditions at whatever cost.

Several of the younger lords who had been or were then in military service came forth, offering themselves, not at all averse, it would seem, to such variation in the entertainment. A handful of drunken barbarians — what were these? Upon them and upon Marius the defence of the villa devolved. Marius gave his orders swiftly, and one by one his lieutenants sped away. All slaves capable of bearing arms were to be equipped at once from the armory. Men were already stationed at intervals along the outer walls to guard against surprise. The house seethed with uproar, which no efforts of discipline could quench. Women wept and clung together, terrified each by the others' terror. They huddled in bunches around the walls, catching at every man who would pause to speak with them. Yes, there had been a barbarian even within the hall, a great fellow, tall as the house, who spat fire and spoke Latin as no Roman had ever heard Latin spoken before. Ay, truly, all the

gods might witness that he had spat fire. And then he had left, taking back to his dogs of comrades their lord's refusal to yield up his guest. So there would be an attack, and men had many other things to do than to be stopped and chattered to by foolish women. Mingled always with the lamentations of these was men's shouting, a trampling of many feet, a swift confusion. The lights, continually fanned by the passing of people, began to take on a lurid glare. In the wind which blew about the crowded court, cressets flared horribly, with very evil-smelling smoke. Their light fell waveringly on jewels and golden collars and rich robes, and on burnished weapons in the hands of slaves. Long since had the porter fled from his lodge, and his place was taken by a score of eager defenders.

Marius snatched a moment from the importunities of those who would know the precise state of their danger, and exactly how long it must be before they should all be slain, and ran up the stairs which led to the upper rooms. He felt his way through the darkness until he came upon a window, very narrow and small, so high that he could overlook the rest of the house and by leaning out see something of what went on in front. And at what he saw he gave an exclamation, sharp and low, and his eyes glittered like those of a warhorse which scents battle. For all below him were lights which glinted in and out across the night; and to his trained ears rose the stamp and snort of stallions held in check, and the stir and rustle of many men. How many he could not tell, for the moon, fighting her way through a smother of clouds, gave scarce light to see, and in the trees the shadows were delusive.

A man's voice shouted; other voices took it up, until a seething bubble of sound, hoarse and significant, eddied around the house and lost itself in distance. A stealthy stir and movement heaved itself from among the shadows; there was the clank of a weapon against an iron stirrup; vague forms seemed to circle more closely about the house. The voice shouted again and was answered by a scurry of horses' feet.

"There be more than I had thought," Marius muttered, and turned to go. "And they are not all mounted. Also I think that they will try to take the door by storm. Well, they can try! More than two may play at that game!"

In time, those without began an attempt to batter their way in, so that Marius proclaimed them very drunk and more foolish. He said nothing of his suspicion that this was merely intended to mask an attack in some other quarter, and was inclined to be scornful of this untried foe. So that some of the old men, taking no consideration of the fact that although his words were light his actions were prompt and well-planned, became timid, and the shrieks of the women redoubled at every assault upon the door. He strove to assure them that if their besiegers did break in, they could get no further for the bristling hedge of swords and spears which waited. But to this the timid ones replied with reason that they did not want them in at all. Various guests began to take it in their heads that this was not the entertainment they had come for; and in an access of the strange panic which is liable to plunge even the most sober crowd into blind folly, if nothing worse, collected their valuables and their attendants and prepared incontinently to fly from the house. Greatly their wrath raged when

Marius refused to let them out. They muttered that the heads of upstarts were easily turned by a little power, and they had rather be slain in the open than butchered like rats in their hole.

And at this, the first hint of insubordination among his forces, Marius became no longer the easy-going gallant whom most of them had known, but a being new and strange. He sprang to the mastery of the situation by, as it were, divine right, a right which was his by grace of the power that had trained him to face and control crises such as these. He treated these high-born lords and ladies as though they had been squads of mutinous recruits; he lashed them with his glance; he no longer requested, he ordered. His voice held a rasp which none had ever heard, and which brought them from displeased dignity to instant and abject obedience. He spared none, — faded voluptuary, whining graybeard, nor restive youth; in an hour he had bullied and frightened them into working like galley-slaves, and all the house was under the iron discipline of his camp.

In her chamber, Varia, in all her terror and loneliness, was forgotten. About her was an insistent clamor of confusion; she stood in the middle of the room, dazed and overwhelmed by it, the light flowing softly over her. Now and again a shouted order was flung across the tumult; with this there began presently to mingle sounds from without. In the corridor words flew by her, whose meaning she scarcely comprehended.

"They have taken a tree to batter down the door — "

"My lord Marius saith we are *not* to use the boiling pitch until he gives command."

"He was crossing the court and an arrow fell from heaven and smote him."

"Thou liest, fool! It came in at a window!"

And almost in her ears, so close it seemed, a masterful voice shouted:

"Where is that fat beast Hito who hath the keys?" and was gone like smoke.

And Hito's name was taken up and tossed from hall to hall; she heard it now near, now far, in the midst of the rush of hasty footsteps and the tangle of voices. A scream pierced through the clamor and hung a moment above all other sounds; someone was wounded. She had a vision of Claudius the physician brushing by her half-open door. As from a mist of terror she saw the flying of his skirt and the gleam of his silver beard. The actual point of attack was too far away for her to know what went on. She began to draw her breath in small gasping sobs, glancing this way and that, as one who longs to flee and dares not.

A sound in the garden caught her ears; from where she stood she strained her eyes to see. Only the armed man on guard behind the little narrow door, vine-hung, which led to the outer world. The man, though she could not see him for the darkness, was short and fat, and his little pig's eyes were glazed with fear. But there came other sounds; and a black figure heaved itself above the wall, on the outer side, against the starlight, and tottered insecurely there. And then that armed man squealed, and cast his weapon on the ground, and knelt; and this also she could not see. Nor could she hear the words which the black figure on the wall flung down, nor what was answered, abjectly, with prayers and

promises. She did not see the dark bulk slide scrambling down the wall, landing cat-like on its feet; she did not see it struggle a moment with the kneeling man who tried to rise and flee, and thrust him forward on his face. Again new sounds reached her out of all the uproar on the other side of the house; the grating of a key, the thud of feet upon the sward. Black figures came headlong out of the night; there was a clash of spurs on the marble steps; and one man, and another, and a third, leaped into the lighted room.

First of them all was a short man, bowed in the legs, with a red scrub of beard and yellow eyes which gleamed at her. And those behind him were great and blond and bearded, with drawn daggers, and round shields of bull's hide on their left arms. They crowded on the heels of the foremost, and stopped short, staring in the brilliant light at the palpitating figure of rose.

Until then Varia had shrunk and wept and trembled, a terrified child, alone, with no hand to cling to. But as the first barbarian crossed her threshold, she faced him, a desperate, tender thing at bay. Unknown, unreckoned with, there lurked within her the strange race-instinct, born of blood in which was no drop of craven blood, and of caste which was greater than that of kings. She was the product of her day and her environment; but she was the product also of her mighty past, of great men who had fought and ruled their world, and great women who had ruled with them. It was instinct, dumb and blind, but it held her on her feet, facing them, though her eyes were frozen with terror; and she obeyed it because she had no sense or will to disobey.

For one heart-beat there was no sound but the heavy

panting of men's breath. Then a man snatched a golden cup rimmed with rubies, which stood on a stand near the window, and thrust it into his breast. With his first motion the two others started upon Varia where she stood, rose and white, in the middle of the chamber. Midway, the larger man pushed the smaller red-bearded one aside; he recovered, with a vicious pass of his knife, which the other gave aside to parry.

"I entered first!" the red one shouted. "Hands off, thou son of swine! Said we not that I, Wulf, who brought thee hither, should have first choice? Call you the others; thus we shall catch them front and rear."

"Call yourself!" said the other. He sprang forward, clutching at Varia, slipped on the polished floor, and plunged headlong at her feet. Varia screamed in terror; and as Wulf overleaped his prostrate comrade and caught her in his arms, screamed again. Her head was crushed against Wulf's leather-clad breast, but she struggled and cried aloud as a hare cries when the hounds have brought it down.

There was a rush from the corridor outside, a long-drawn shout of warning and triumph, answered by yells from the garden, where more black figures came leaping. Wardo, grimed from head to foot, dashed into the room at the head of his men as a crowd of invaders surged through the long window. He lunged at Wulf with the short broad sword he carried, and the point came away red. Wulf gurgled and fell, dragging Varia with him; and the fight closed over them both as water closes over a cast stone.

And as Life had entered the garden by that little narrow door, so Death also entered, bringing with it what Death must bring.

III

WHEN dawn washed the first faint streak of gray across the night sky, the barbarians, beaten back and baffled, retreated to the great Wood from which they had come, and lurked darkly there.

"I think we are not yet through with them," said Marius. He had seen Saxons fight before.

With dawn, also, Eudemius sent forth a trusty slave westward to seek aid from the civil authorities and from his own people at the mine, the nearest point at which it might be obtained, and with the dawn was found the body of Hito, stabbed in the back, lying near the little garden door which led to the outer world.

Many of the guests chose to take their chances of attack, and left the villa hurriedly while yet the day was young. Eudemius could not hold them prisoners, and would not if he could. His own was enough to guard. But Felix did not go, and Eudemius could not order him forth. He dared not leave the villa, where he felt a measure of security; were he to do so, he knew that it would be his fate to be captured and killed before he

could win to safety. So they shrugged their shoulders and left him.

That day the villa, unmolested and with half its inmates gone, seemed to sink into a calm of exhaustion, which, after the night that had passed, was like the calm of death. Marius and Eudemius themselves superintended the cleaning up of the house, the strengthening of barricades, the muster of the slaves for what further service might be needed.

"I trust the messengers whom I sent forth have not been waylaid," Eudemius said.

"Help could not come before to-morrow night," Marius answered. "It will go hard with us if we cannot hold out that long. This time it may be that we shall fare better; there will be no Hito to betray us."

"I shall have him buried at the crossroads with a stake through his evil heart!" said Eudemius. "There be eleven dead awaiting burial. This we shall do to-night. And Varia, my son, how fares she?"

"She is unhurt, but exhausted, and the old woman watches her," said Marius. "Sleep thou also, and I shall see to setting a watch about the house, and that those may take rest who can be spared."

Mycon entered, his arms before his face.

"Lords, there be a slave, Wardo the Saxon, who insists that he hath grave matters for thine ears. He is in very evil plight —"

"Let him stand forth," said Eudemius.

Wardo came, tall, grim, very dirty. A bloody rag bound his head; he limped, and one of his sandals was stained with blood. He crossed his arms before his face, and waited.

"Speak!" Eudemius commanded.

And Wardo spoke, standing erect, his blue eyes on his lord's face.

"Lord, it was not Hito who betrayed the household, as I hear men say. It was I. There is a little man, red like a fox, who came to a house on Thorney where was I. He also is Saxon. And I, being drunken with much wine, did boast to this one of my lord's greatness, and of the feasts which were made within this house, and the wealth which was herein. And when I was sober, after many hours, one told me of what I had done, and of how this red Saxon was gone to set his fellows upon my lord. So I rode until my horse fell with me and died, but I was too late to bring warning to my lord. When I reached this house last night, it was surrounded, with the door beaten down and men swarming within. So I, being Saxon, and not suspected in the dark, entered, shouting, with others. And in my lady's chamber found I that red Wulf, who is no wolf, but a sly thieving fox, and tried to slay him. But he got away. I am my lord's man."

"It is well that you have told me this," said Eudemius. "At sunset you shall be crucified. Go."

Wardo crossed his arms before his face and went.

When his work about the house was done, Marius entered softly the room where Varia lay, tended by Nerissa. The old woman slipped away, and Varia held out a slim hand to him in one of her sudden and unaccountable moods of coquetry. He kissed it gallantly.

"How fares my lady?"

Varia shivered.

"I do not wish to think of it! Were it not for Wardo —"

"Ay, that is true," said Marius, misunderstanding. "Well, by this night his fault will be punished. But how know you of what Wardo hath done?"

"How?" she echoed in surprise. "Was it not my life he saved? And what is he to be punished for? What hath he done?"

"Naught that in the least would interest thee," he told her.

"He shall not be harmed," she said firmly. "He saved me from two great men and one little one who would have slain me, and he is not to suffer for it."

"Now this is something new. Dost know, sweeting, that had it not been for this knave Wardo, no great men nor little would have come upon thee? It was he who betrayed us, and it is right that he should suffer for it."

Her eyes filled with tears.

"He saved my life, and I will not have him suffer! What is to be done to him this night?"

He tried to put her off.

"Never mind him, sweet one. Think of him no more."

But she repeated stubbornly:

"What is to be done to him this night?" She glanced at him, one of her strange and sidelong glances. "Is he to be — crucified?"

Marius started in spite of himself.

"Who told thee?" he demanded.

"None told me," she answered. She raised her hands to her temples. "I felt it — here. So, I say that he shall *not* be crucified, nor harmed in any way at all. And thou must see to it!" She was like an imperious young empress, commanding her meanest slave.

"And if I will not?" said the slave, perversely.

Her child's mouth quivered.

"But thou wilt!" she pleaded. She laid a hand upon his bare sinewy arm, fingering the heavy golden armlet on it, and for a fleeting instant raised her eyes to his. "Thou wilt?" she repeated sweetly.

His dark face hardened against her wiles.

"The man hath played the traitor. He also is Saxon. Who knows but that he may set his fellows on again? Nay, lady wife; I fear thy man must die."

"Ah, no!" she begged. "It is the first request I make of thee — thou 'lt not refuse it if I ask thee?"

"Ask it then," said Marius, his eyes on her, "in the right and proper way that a wife should ask her husband."

Rose-leaf color flushed her cheeks; she raised herself to her knees amid the draperies of the couch, and clasped her folded hands upon her breast, and closed her eyes, devout and meek and holy.

"Pray thee, let Wardo go, my lord!" she said softly, and opened her eyes quickly to see how he might take it. "Is it thus thou wouldst have me ask?"

He bent his head, sudden laughter in his eyes, and kissed her pleading lips.

"Who could resist thee, lady mine?" he cried gayly. "Sure never did unworthy man have so fair a lawyer. Ay, child, if he saved thy life — and thy account and his do tally — he shall go free."

Varia slipped out of his arms and clapped her hands.

"Go then — go quickly and tell my lord father so! He will do it for thee, as thou hast done it for me. Is it not so?"

So it came to pass that evening that the cross in the

chamber of fate knew not its victim; and for this there were more reasons than a girl's tender wiles.

For while the flame of sunset again stabbed the dusk of night, came men out from the Wood of Anderida, fifteen miles away, some on foot and some on horseback, with at their head the red Wulf, astride a great bay horse. Wardo, from his station on the roofs, saw them from far off; saw also that many as they had been the night before, they were now fivefold more, an army bent on plunder, captained by lawlessness. And still no aid had come. Wardo told Marius, and Marius went up on the roofs to see, and came back square of jaw and with moody eyes. He sought out Eudemius, where the latter was going the rounds of their makeshift defences, and said:

"This red hound of hell hath come back upon us and brought his pack, five times as many as before. Thou knowest I am not one to turn tail when there is fighting to be done, but I can see what is to be seen. And we have women and children with us."

"You think, then, that we should fly from here?" Eudemius asked with sombre eyes.

"I think we are lucky to have the chance to attempt it," said Marius, curtly. "Were it not better to lose half rather than all? For an hour we might stand against them, scarcely more. Thy familia numbers five hundred souls; of these some are wounded and more are but incumbrances. If it pleaseth thee to stay, thou knowest that nothing will suit me better. A good fight against odds is worth risking much for. I but state the case as I have seen it."

"My fighting days are over," said Eudemius. "But I am not too old to run. And there are the women and

the children. Be it as thou sayest, lad. This work is thy work —" he broke off to chuckle grimly — "and thou 'rt a clever workman! We have chariots and horses, and I will give command to pack what papers and things of value I may."

Again the villa was in uproar. Chests were strapped on sumpter mules; chariots with pawing horses stood in the main courtyard, ready to be gone. Slaves ran here and there with scrolls and bundles in their arms; cooks left the meat turning on the spits; dancing girls, wrapped in cloaks and clinging to their treasures, huddled together, waiting for the start. The gates were opened, and all but certain of the stewards and body-slaves were permitted to depart. They swarmed from the villa like ants when their hill is crushed, and spread off to the west, away from the direction of the enemy. And always the slave stationed on watch cried down to those below the approach, near and ever nearer, of that enemy; and at every cry a spasm of increased activity shuddered through the house. It was each one for himself, and the hindmost would surely rue it.

"Should we be separated in the night, let us plan to meet at one spot," said Marius. He was strapping a bundle of food and a flask of wine to his saddle-bow, in the hurrying confusion of the courtyard, too old a campaigner to face a march without supplies. Eudemius nodded, his arms full of papers, which a slave was placing in a box.

"At Londinium, then, whence I shall sail for Gaul as soon as may be. We will wait there, each for the other. If the barbarians sweep the country widely, we may not at first be able to reach there."

"That is true," said Marius. "I have thought of that. Our best plan will be to hold west from here, make a half circle and gain the Bibracte road, and when the brutes are worrying the carcass here, return eastward, passing them by the road, and so reach Londinium. The gods grant that Ætius can spare me a legion!"

In the end they barely escaped. The slave on watch shouted warning; the stewards flung themselves on their horses and made off. Varia ran into the court, crying for Nerissa; without ado Marius lifted her into the chariot, of which Wardo held the reins. The chariot of Eudemius, driven by himself, was already rumbling through the gateway. There was a terrified scurry of slaves from under his horses' feet. He swung into the road and lashed the stallions to a gallop. Close at his heels Wardo followed, his grays leaping in the traces, with Varia, white-faced, crouched low in front of him. The hollow thunder of the wheels mingled with the pounding of hoofs as they dashed into the oak-bordered road. Marius swung himself to his horse's back as the beast reared with excitement, found his stirrups, and galloped hard after, his sword clapping against his greave. He did not see who followed through the gate, for as he caught up with the flying chariots, the first of the pursuers mounted the brow of the hill to the east of the house, not a quarter of a mile away.

Some of them rode their horses into the courtyard; others took up the trail of the fleeing Romans. But they were there for plunder; soon they gave up the chase and galloped back to strive for their share with the others. Those slaves who had been left behind or who were overtaken on the road were slain; as the sun went

down there began in the stately halls an orgy which sounded to high heaven.

So when they had eaten and drunk until they could eat and drink no more, they fought among themselves over the division of the spoils; and between them all they killed their leader, Wulf the red son of Wulf. Also, in their drunken frenzy, they tried to set the villa on fire. In the midst of this, while they swept ravening through the rooms like devouring flame, while every court held its knot of drunken brawlers, who cursed and fought in darkness or under the flaring light of cressets, a detachment of milites stationarii, or military police, in whose hands was the maintenance of law and public order, rode over the western hills, coming hotfoot from Calleva, thirty miles away. They fell upon the barbarians, taking them by surprise; these forgot their quarrels and made common cause against this sudden foe. At once bloody battle was waged beneath the stars; the pillared halls rang to the clang of weapons and the thud of armed feet. Men in armor of bronze came crashing to the ground with their blood spreading from them darkly over the marble floors; in the courtyards men at every moment stumbled over bodies of the dead and dying.

And an hour before dawn there arrived from the west a body of footsore miners, armed for the most part with picks, which it appeared they were skilled in using in a variety of ways. These combined with the stationarii; for an hour red death swept through hall and court and chamber, to the tune of the yelling of the human wolf-pack loosed for blood. At the end of it the barbarians, harried before and behind, unable to rally, fell into panic

and started to flee, laden with what spoil they could bear away. By dawn what was left of the villa was again in Roman hands, a wreck mighty in its desolation, epitome of the splendor that had been and the tragedy that was to come. The pendulum of Time had started on its inevitable downward course, and where had been power and grandeur were but the ashes of pomp and pride.

IV

NOW, four days after that night when Wardo had betrayed his lord in the house of Chloris, men coming up from the mine, at sunset when the day's work was done, were herded by their overseers and guards into the bare open space at the mouth of the mine. The superintendent came among them, a grizzled man, hard-faced, as became his lot, and spoke. Beside him was a slave whom some there recognized as from the villa, travel-stained and dropping with fatigue, just arrived with letters from his lord.

"An attack hath been made upon the house of our lord by barbarians and insurgents," said the superintendent, glancing over the tablets he held. "It was repulsed, but with loss upon both sides. The barbarians came from the Silva Anderida, and it is thought that they are being reinforced by others, and will try again. My lord is hard pressed, for the house is crowded with guests gathered for the marriage feast of our lady. The attack hath been stubborn beyond belief; the barbarians demand that one lord Felix, who slew their chief at Anderida, be given up to them, and this my lord will not do. Also my lord saith that knowledge of the rich

treasure in the house was betrayed to the barbarians by a drunken slave, and they are hot for plunder. Therefore he hath sent to me, as the nearest one to afford him help, commanding that I say to you in his name: Those of you whose crimes are not murder or against religion shall be returned to the house to take part in its defence, as many as can be singled out by to-morrow's dawn. For loyal service and obedience to orders, ye shall receive the freedom of *casarii* and your sentence here shall be cancelled. To-night your records shall be looked up, and to-morrow those of you whose names and numbers are called will be sent forward as quickly as may be."

Half a hundred voices raised a tired cheer, not so much because their lord was in danger, as because there was prospect of release. The nightly rations of black bread and beans were served out. Some men took their portion to the huts where they slept, as beasts carry food to their lair; but these were for the most part condemned for murders and religious crimes and knew that they had no hope of freedom. The majority gathered in discussion about the fires, always with alert sentries hovering near at hand. All that night the air throbbed with expectation.

In the first dark hours of morning the blast of a brazen trumpet brought five hundred men into the open, eager to know their fate. The superintendent and his assistants appeared with lists of names which they had worked all night to complete. Men pressed close around him, eager not to lose a word; the overseers, whips in hand, mingled with the crowd to check incipient disturbances. A score of mounted guards were drawn up

near by, waiting to escort the detail. Lanterns shone here and there through the thin gray mist which hung over the broken land.

Nicanor woke at the first brassy blare of the trumpet. His face was keen with his first conscious thought; there was no doubt that he would be of those chosen. He made his toilet with a shake of his tunic, and went outside. Around him, in the semi-darkness, figures were hurrying to where the superintendent, mounted on a keg, was calling the roll by the light of a lantern, with his hood pulled well over his face against the keen air of morning. His harsh voice, shouting names and numbers, rose above the stir and rustle of excited men.

Three rods from his hut, Nicanor was jostled violently by one who wheeled with an oath to see who had run against him.

"Have a care, Balbus!" Nicanor said shortly. "What is thy haste? Dost hope that thou wilt be chosen, man-killer? What wouldst give to be in my place? For I shall go, having neither religion nor blood upon my head."

Balbus snarled at the taunt. It had been flung at him before, with variations, until his temper was frayed to breaking-point. From Nicanor it was not to be endured; for since the day of the rat-fight encounters between the two had been frequent and bloody, in spite of the guards' whips. Now jealousy was added to the wrath of Balbus, and with this the devil in him broke its chains. But after his nature, he was treacherous. He said nothing, nor gave warning that his anger was more than skin-deep; and made as though to pass Nicanor and go his way. Nicanor went on, laughing carelessly.

But he was scarcely past when Balbus wheeled around and struck. There was the glimmer of a blade, a smothered oath, and that was all. Nicanor turned as though to attack his assailant, who had sprung back, staggered, pitched forward, and fell, rolling down the slight declivity. He struggled a moment to rise, and lay down again, very quiet, and the slope of ground hid him from casual observation in the camp.

Balbus drove his weapon into the earth to clean it, hid it in his shirt, and hurried into the crowd of miners, who, as the roll-call progressed, were being divided into two groups.

"Nimus!" the superintendent called, and a man stepped forward and joined the smaller group. "Nico! Niger! Nicanor!"

And at this Balbus pressed forward, elbowing to the superintendent's side.

"Master, the man Nicanor hath been fighting, it would seem, although with whom I do not know. When I came by, I saw him lying dead upon the ground by the huts."

"Nonius! Ollus!" cried the overseer, and in the same breath — "When I have started these I will send men to bury him. — Ossian!"

Shortly after sunrise three hundred and fifty men were started under escort to their lord's assistance, equipped as well as might be with the means at hand.

When Nicanor struggled back to consciousness, after unmarked hours, the noise of the tramping of men had ceased, and again the world was dark. He tried to move, and a twinge of agony hot as flame shot through him, shocking him into full wakefulness. He sat upright,

wincing with pain, and slowly felt himself all over. There was blood upon his head, where he had struck it against a stone in falling, but it was caked and dried. And his tunic was torn, on the left side, just behind and under the shoulder. It took him some time to reach around and find the place, for every movement was slow torture. The cloth at this place was stiff with what he knew was blood. So, then, this was where the knife of Balbus had gone home. He wondered if the wound were serious. The stars danced dizzily before his eyes, and he was faint from loss of blood. But there was a thing he had to do, a thing which all through unconsciousness had given him no rest. Across the deeps of night and of oblivion a voice was calling, and he must follow it while he had life to stand. He got to his feet and stood swaying uncertainly. By sheer force of will he steadied himself, and turning his back on the silent settlement, started walking across the rough and broken country straight eastward toward the road which led to his heart's desire.

Sometimes he walked; sometimes he fell and lay staring at the high sky and the wheeling stars, waiting without sound or motion until he could gather strength to rise. Sometimes he felt his tunic wet with fresh blood, and could not get at the wound to stanch it, and did not try; sometimes iron hammers, red-hot, beat upon his temples and left him blind and reeling with pain. Always one idea possessed him; he must get to her who called him. She was in danger; he cursed the gods who had held him back from starting to her rescue with his mates. Time lost — his chance gone — though he died for it, he would not let himself be beaten

in this by Fate. Every ounce of the dogged sullen strength of him gathered itself to meet the demands of his stubborn will. And always, whether he walked in reason or in delirium, his course held eastward, straight as a homing pigeon for its loft.

In time, when the sun was high, he reached the road which crossed the Sabrina and led to the moor towns beyond. Here he entered the barge of a waterman about to leave the bank, and sat waiting to be ferried across, staring straight before him, with never an answer to the boatman's idle talk. The boat's nose poked into the further bank, and the boatman demanded his fare. Nicanor looked at him with eyes glittering with fever beneath his shaggy thatch of hair, and shook his head mutely, as at one who spoke an unknown tongue. He got out of the boat and walked up the road, and the man crossed his fingers in superstitious fright, muttered a prayer to the river-gods against ill luck, and let him go.

Once started again, Nicanor walked all that day, and at nightfall reached Corinium, five and twenty miles away. Here his overwrought strength gave out, and he slept as the dead sleep, in the fields outside the town. Hours before dawn he woke, haunted by the demon of unrest which rode him, begged food and a cup of milk at a farmhouse by the road, and started on again. All that day he walked, a mere machine dominated by a force which would drive it forward to the very verge of dissolution; and in the late evening he reached Cunetio. Here he did not know when he stopped, for he went to sleep on his feet, and woke and found himself on his back by the roadside, with the sun at high noon. Desperate for the time he had lost, he hastened on, and in

an hour came upon one of the small stations threaded along the high-roads between towns which were more than ten Roman miles apart, kept as taverns by *diversores* for the entertainment of travellers. There were folk stopping here, for outside the inn door stood horses, saddled and tethered. Nicanor selected the animal which best pleased him, — a tall roan, — mounted, and rode away without so much as a glance behind him for pursuit.

After that his way was easier. He met people, who stared at him and sometimes asked questions which he heard himself answering. Dimly, without at all taking it in, he understood that they were vastly excited about something, but it was not worth while to ask questions on his own account. They were mere shadows, without substance, which drifted by and were forgotten; only he and his desire in all the world were real. So he reached Calleva, in the open country amid the heather, where he stopped for an hour for food and to rest his horse. On again then for fifteen miles, and he rode through the station of Bibracte, and turned aside into the oak-lined by-road for the last ten miles of his journey — miles which stretched before him as the most endless of all. Again excitement burned in his veins like fever; he kicked his horse into a gallop which more than once threatened life and limb. They pounded up the last slope which hid the villa from view, spent horse and exhausted man, and gained the rise. And Nicanor flung the roan back upon its haunches with a jerk which all but broke its jaw.

"Holy gods!" he muttered; and then — "Holy gods! Am I mad — or do I dream again?"

The sight burst upon him in all its blinding suddenness

and appalling hideousness, — a smoking ruin where had been the stately mansion of his lord; blank windows grinning at him like dead, open eyes; the garden of his dreams desecrated, its wall shattered, lying open, naked and despoiled, before the world. At the tinge of smoke which hovered like the breath of death above the place, his horse flung up its head and snorted. Nicanor lifted his arms to the high heaven which for him was empty, and brought them slowly down before his face.

"Oh, thou heedless god, whoever thou mayest be that hast done this thing!" he cried into the bitterness of the desolation before him, "smite thou me also, for there is naught left for me! The stars fight against me; I am cursed with unending bitterness, and all that I can do is of no avail."

The shock was as great as though he saw her whom he sought lying dead before him. For the first time he faltered, not knowing whither to go or what to do, not daring to search for what he feared to find. His horse, standing with legs spread wide and drooping head, heaved a great sob of exhaustion from its panting flanks. Nicanor, staring ahead of him with gloomy eyes, roused, picked up his loose reins, and rode down the hill. At the yawning doorway, where no porter challenged, he swung himself from the saddle and went into the great central court. Here was grass uprooted, a fountain wrecked; marble walks were stained with blood and the marks of feet; plants were torn up and broken. Through empty room after empty room he hurried, — to hers, his lady's, first of all. And at the threshold of her bed-chamber he stumbled over a body, — Nerissa's, the old nurse; and behind her lay Mycon, chief of the eunuchs.

The room was in confusion; chests were torn open and their contents rifled; furniture was upset and hacked. In the bathroom near by, the marble bath, sunken in the floor, was filled with water, and there were towels and unguents and perfumes ready at hand. A bronze strigil lay across the threshold, where it had been dropped in someone's hasty flight.

On from here he went, sick with fear of what might have been, and passed through other rooms. Here were the same signs of wanton destruction; mosaic floors cracked and defaced, statues overthrown, hangings torn down and swaying to the wind in rags. He found other bodies; Hito's huddled in the violated garden, amid the tangle of wrecked vines and trampled shrubbery; and those of many slaves. The storerooms had been looted, and broken amphoræ and the remains of food showed where drunken orgies had been held. In the Hall of Columns every article of gold or silver had been carried off. Priceless vessels in embossed and enamelled glass lay shattered into fragments; even some of the bronze lamps were gone. Velvet covers had been stripped from the couches; the table was drenched in spilled wine. A bust of the Emperor which had stood on its marble pedestal at the end of the hall lay upon the floor, mutilated almost beyond recognition — work of Romans, this, of the insurgents who refused to acknowledge the divinity of their temporal lord and sovereign.

Nicanor stood in the doorway, the lone living figure in a great desolation. All his fears and uncertainties were written in his face. When had this thing happened? What had become of his lord and his lord's guests? And his lady, what of her? Had the relief from the mine been

in time, and why were there no signs of them? What had become of the invaders, and why had all living things so completely disappeared? And where were the stationarii, that they had not taken possession of the place in the name of the law?

He went back to those rooms which had been his lady's, torn with bitter doubt and dread. He walked reverently among the things which had been hers, as one who treads on holy ground, touching with his hands a chair over which was flung a rug of snowy furs, as though she had just left it — a table covered with bottles and perfume pots. And beside the couch where she had lain he dropped upon his knees and hid his face in the silken covers.

Heavy footsteps echoed outside in the empty corridor, and Nicanor started to his feet, a hand on his knife. A man entered, stepping over Nerissa's body, and stopped short. By his dress, his iron helmet, and short sword, Nicanor knew him for a stationarius. This one, recovering from his surprise, advanced quickly.

"So, fellow, I've caught you red-handed!" he cried, and grasped Nicanor's shoulder. Nicanor winced at the touch, but made no effort to get away.

"There is no need of that," he said quietly. "I am my lord's man, slave in this house until a month ago." His collar of brass, with its graven name, bore evidence to his words. "I pray you tell me of what hath happened here, and of my lord, and his — his people."

"That is another matter," said the stationarius, and let him go. "I thought thee of those roving reavers who have plagued us day and night. Thou hast indeed been out of the world not to know these things. Three nights

ago this happened. We were sent down from Calleva as soon as the word was brought, but when we arrived the mischief had been done. The lords had fled; the barbarians were in possession, and wallowing in the havoc they had wrought. We gave them battle; in the midst of it came your lord's men from the mines, whom also he had sent for. The barbarians fled with what booty they could gather. Now the place is patrolled by stationarii. We have been burying bodies and saving what property we might, until your lord shall give command concerning it."

"And my lord?" Nicanor asked. "Whither hath he fled?"

"It is said to Londinium," the soldier answered. "Thence to Rutupiæ to take ship for Gaul. But of this I know not the truth. We are directed to send in our reports to his house in Londinium; that is all that hath been told us."

"Then have I no time to lose," said Nicanor.

Forthwith he remounted and rode eastward from the villa into the deepening dusk. He turned into the Noviomagus road which led northward to Londinium, down which he had been brought a prisoner so long a time before, when first he had entered into his slaveship. And here he saw that his lord's mansion had not been the only place to suffer.

For he found himself in the very track of the barbarians as they had spread out of the Silva Anderida, through a neck of which, fifteen miles ahead, the road passed. An acrid smell of smoke hung heavy in the twilight; when he reached the station of Noviomagus he found it all in flames, with dark figures which ran

wildly in and out against the glare. Here he changed his exhausted horse for a riderless gray which came snorting with terror out of the smoke and gloom, ready to welcome a master's hand and voice. He caught it, left the good roan by the roadside, and hastened on. He met and passed people on the road fleeing from burning houses and wrecked homes; in his ears were the crackle of flames and the wailing of women who mourned their dead. From small hamlets scattered in the country, folk were seeking refuge in the larger towns. Yet when he had passed these heedless, scattered groups, he rode almost alone.

All through the scented night he rode, and the round yellow moon rode with him. Strange things were happening beneath that moon; in the crucible of destiny a new land was forming, a new order of things was rising on the ashes of the old. Change, long germinating in hidden depths, was in the air, blowing warm with the breath of the South; in the earth, stirring with the first quickening of Spring; in the hearts and minds of men. And it was in Nicanor's heart as he rode fast through the night, fostered in his long season of darkness, unconscious, and inevitable as the changes which were taking place around him.

Ahead of him the great road stretched white in the moonlight, a broad ribbon which lost itself among hills and in the shadows of trees. In his ears was the thunder of his horse's feet, pounding insistent clamor into the quiet of the night; the wind of the speed of his going swept cool against his face. The night was gray around him, a velvet moon-steeped darkness, odorous with the fragrance of breaking earth. Far away the

deep-throated bay of a dog rose and died across the world. A bell note, thinned by distance to a faint dream-sound, stole over silent hill and valley; peace seemed to wrap the world around as in a cloister garden. Yet not so many miles away were blazing fires, and red wounds, and the black and bitter death of a battle lost. With every mile the scene unrolled itself before him; off in the wide rolling country, which stretched on either hand, lights twinkled here and yonder, wakeful eyes of watchfulness among the hills. He passed pale glimmering bogs where by day lonely herons brooded, and wide barren heaths over which the road led straight as an arrow's flight.

And as the miles reeled away under him his excitement began to mount with the sweep of his horse's stride. The exultation of rapid motion mingled with the rising fever of his wound; he wished to shout aloud, to sing. Vague forms seemed to slip by him in the shadows; in every bush beside the road he saw white faces lurking. Strange and half-formed impressions haunted him, of bearded men passing, who sometimes spoke an unknown tongue and sometimes vanished silently as ghosts. Later, he could not tell if he had seen them or if it had been but his fevered dreams; for always when he forced himself to rouse and look about him sanely, the road reached before him white and deserted.

All sense of pain left him, even all consciousness of the horse that he bestrode. He seemed floating miraculously through air, and was aware of vague surprise that he did not fall. He could not stop; an iron weight upon his shoulders crushed him to the earth, but at the same time a force against which he could not struggle drove him on. He became possessed of the idea that again he was

working in the mines, under the overseer's lash; the sound of his horse's feet merged imperceptibly into the tapping of the picks, hideously loud, and the maddening rhythm of the sound pounded his brain into bruised torpor. Then he knew that he was on fire; from head to foot he burned, parched as a soul in hell. Balls of flame danced before his eyes; while he looked upon them they turned to faces grinning from out a blood-red mist. The faces drew closer and melted into one face, Varia's face, as he had seen it last, white, with scarlet lips and flaming poppies upon either temple.

Then the mist in his eyes cleared suddenly, and he saw the figure below the face, wreathed in a floating web of moonlight through which white limbs gleamed, with dusky hair that streamed behind it in a cloud; saw that it was flying from him upon a great white horse. And as it fled it looked back at him with laughing eyes which yet were Varia's eyes; and in its hand it bore a wan pale flame which was his soul, the essence of the genius in him which was his life. At once he knew the figure to be Life and Love, and all that men strive for and hold most dear; and all his being leaped to the fierce desire for conquest, and he shouted in triumph and pursued. But as fast as the good gray went, with ears laid back and neck outstretched and body flattened to its desperate headlong stride, that great white horse went faster, bearing ever just beyond his reach the slim figure, veiled in misty moonbeams, that laughed into his eyes yet fled from his embraces.

He laughed aloud in answer, caught up in the whirlwind of his furious speed; heaven and earth held nothing but the divine frenzy of his desire. Fire coursed through his

veins; the chase was Life itself, full-blooded, reckless, exultant and sublime, rioting gloriously with untamed passion. He was a god, all-conquering in the fierce pride of his lusty youth and strength; Life was his, and Love was his, if he could seize them. Now the gray's head was at the white horse's shoulder; now he bent forward, laughing his hot triumph into those eyes which were Varia's eyes, his arm outstretched to grasp the mist-veiled figure that leaned away from him, flying from him yet ready to yield in his clasp, with the pale flame wavering in one hand and a white arm raised to ward him off. He had no eyes for the road ahead; a stride, and the prize would be in his eager arms. Ahead was the darkness of the great wood; a stride, and he was within its shadow. The moon was blotted out by the high blackness of trees; and in a heartbeat with its light were gone the white horse and the slim rider with its veil of gauze — gone like a wreath of smoke or a dream which is lost in darkness. He reeled in his saddle under the shock of it, and cried aloud in his disappointment; baffled, he thought that he had lost his quarry among the trees. The gray thundered on, with the reins hanging loose upon its neck, through the damp silence of the wood, where night hung heavy, and out into the open, where again the road gleamed white and empty beneath the moon.

And then the moon was gone, and light went out of the world, and he knew himself for a soul cast into outer darkness. His mind was blank; he knew not whether he lived or died, nor did he care. He lived in a nebulous void of gray unconsciousness, horribly empty of all thought and all sensation.

So he would have ridden, blindly, until his horse fell

or he was halted. But through sheer exhaustion his fever burned itself out, and left him sane once more, and clinging to his horse's neck. His strength was gone; he was dazed and drunken. He came to himself abruptly, like a man starting from uneasy sleep, and stared about him, not knowing even how far he had been carried. He was on the break of the slope leading down to the marsh-ford, and the lights of Thorney glinted over the water in his eyes.

V

HIS horse stumbled, and he pulled it up with an oath. Now he was vividly conscious, every nerve strung taut, every sense alert, as a man will sometimes oddly waken from heavy slumber. They went down the slope at a lurching gallop, along the road churned into mire by the passing of many carts, and splashed into the muddy waters of the ford. And on the further bank the good gray stumbled again, tried gallantly to regain its stride, and came crashing to the ground with a coughing groan and a long sickening stagger. But Nicanor had saved himself from a falling horse before. He was on his feet almost as the beast was down, reeling with sheer weakness, but recovering with dogged persistence. He left the horse dying at the water's edge, and started running up the street which led across the island from ford to ford, and his black shadow raced beside him in the moonlight.

At the low cabin next to the house of Chloris he stopped and pounded on the door.

"Who comes?" cried a great voice within.

"It is I, Nicanor! Let me in!" said Nicanor, huskily, out of a throat parched and stiff, and still pounded.

The door opened with a rasping of bolts. The bulk of Nicodemus appeared, half undressed, his single eye glinting under its furze of brow.

"Thou, lad? In the name of the goddess mothers, what dost thou here at this hour? Not drunk again? Ha, so! Easy!"

Nicanor, with a hoarse and empty laugh, staggered forward even as his spent steed had done, and Nicodemus caught him and lowered him to the floor. He sat quite helpless, fully conscious, yet with the strength of his limbs gone from him for the moment utterly.

Nicodemus shouted for Myleia. She came, unkempt and kindly; between them the two got Nicanor to his feet and helped him to a bunk. A lodger, wakened by the noise, thrust out a tousled head, saw only a drunken wayfarer, and went to sleep again, all undisturbed. But at this point Nicanor resisted.

"Nay, not yet! I have first a thing to do. — Nico, hath there been trouble of sorts on Thorney these last three days?"

Nicodemus shook his great sides with laughter.

"Trouble? Yea, verily! Thorney hath been hopping to a mad dance these days, promise you!"

"And thou hast been dancing with the maddest," said Myleia, a hand upon his shoulder. "What quarrel is it of thine, my big ugly bear? Some day thou 'lt be brought home to me dead, or else be haled away to be sold as slave."

"Never fear it, jewel of my heart," Nicodemus said tenderly. "Now see we to this battered one. See, here be a bruise upon his skull the bigness of a duck's egg. Get my shears, sweeting, and I 'll clip this lion's mane of

hair. It will lighten his head that that silver tongue of his may wag the better."

"No, you will not!" said Nicanor. "Give me wine and let my hair alone. Man, I tell you I've no time to lose. What happened here?"

"Out of the calm came forth a thunderbolt," said Nicodemus, watching as Myleia brought a bowl of water, with cloths and soothing herbs. She thrust the bowl into his hands, and he stood, great and hairy and patient, holding it for her while she cut away Nicanor's tunic, where it had stuck fast to the wound, and washed away the clotted blood and grime. "But not so long ago as thou hast said. Yester eve comes a cloud of dust over the hill by the marshes, and in the cloud as strange a sight as man may see. Chariots, with horses smoking in the traces, lords on horseback, slaves and rabble, all flying from the gods know what. A tall man, very pale, with a mouth set like the jaws of a trap; a younger one, to whom all turned for command and advice; a woman lovely as — er, that is to say, fair enough to please a taste not over-critical as mine, very pale, with red lips and the eyes of a little child in trouble. They stopped here, even at this house, it being nearest, and bought food and wine, resting for a time, for the woman was as one half dead from weariness. Then went they on once more, and took the road for Londinium. I made as much as five and twenty —"

Nicanor raised his head, and his eyes were full of a weary triumph.

"Nico, that pale lord is my lord, and that fair lady my lady, and I must follow them even across to Gaul."

"What use?" said Nicodemus. "They will not stay

their passage for thee. Tarry rather with us, and be healed. In the wink of a cat's eye I 'll have that collar from off thy throat, and no man be the wiser. We have no son, this old woman of mine and I; stay thou and be son to us. Thy lord will not miss thee, having other matters in his head. And it is long since we heard word from thee, lad."

"I had thought the girl would have told thee," Nicanor said. "And she — where is she?"

"Eh? What she?" Nicodemus asked blankly, and Myleia paused to listen.

"A girl, Eldris by name, half a Briton, I think, who escaped from my lord's house. I told her to come hither, that thou wouldst give her shelter until I could come. Hath she not been here?"

"Never hath such an one darkened these doors of mine," said Nicodemus, and Myleia nodded, adding quickly:

"Nay, or I should know!"

"She hath likely been captured and returned," Nicanor said, and let the subject drop.

In spite of all they could say to him, he borrowed a horse from Nicodemus, and at dawn set forth for Londinium, haggard and stubborn and ridden by haunting desire which would not let him rest. And toward evening he returned, and in his face was written failure. What he told them gave no clew to that which all men could read in him.

"My lord and his family sailed yester eve for Gaul. A ship was on the point of starting, and they were taken on board. This I learned from a waterman at the quays, who had helped to load their goods. And I know beyond

doubt that they are gone, and that they will not return hither. . . . Now I am weary and would rest."

His voice was utterly dead, without life or spirit. Nicodemus, pierced by a glimmer of strange knowledge, laid a hand upon his shoulder. Very dearly he loved his shaggy teller of tales, even though he knew that whether he loved or not was small matter to his idol. His voice lowered to a husky growl of tenderness.

"Son, is all well with thee?"

A spasm, swift and sharp, passed over Nicanor's face, and was gone like a shadow. His eyes flinched as though a hand had touched a raw and quivering nerve.

"Nay," he answered, very quietly. "It is not well."

He wandered out, in time, away from their anxious questionings, across the marsh-ford, and toward the gray hills which rolled away to east and west, where the noise of the traffic could not follow. He threw himself upon the ground and stared upward at the gray misty skies, where no blue showed through and where black dots of birds went sailing. Here was the ground of his boyhood dreams, — he knew it with a tinge of bitterness, — dreams that had ended always under gray skies, upon the bleak hills of the uplands. Here, where the full shy heart of him had first known the secret of its power in those long-gone boyhood days, he had entered upon his heritage, thinking only of its joy, knowing nothing of its pain. And here he had returned. Then he had seen himself a soaring lark, singing out its life in pure joy and triumph in a fair world of dreams and sunshine. Now he knew that the lark was caged, doomed to beat its wings forever against bars stronger than iron, that the dreams were shattered and the world was dark. His life

was empty; he had lost all, a slave without a master, a singer whose song was stilled. His face, unchanging, stared at the changeless sky; he lay stolid and motionless, and aching with dumb loneliness. Out of all the world he knew himself alone, set apart from his kind by that heritage which his ardent youth had thought all joy; alien, with his world not the world of those around him, and his way the way of loneliness.

In time, Nature had her way with him, and he slept, alone upon the hillside, in the dead slumber of exhaustion. The world thundered on around him; the web of Life unrolled endlessly from the distaff of the Second Fate; and he slept on, unheeding.

VI

IN the late afternoon, when gray shadows were stealing westward over the quiet hills, came Eldris along the road toward Thorney, with an empty basket on her arm. She looked younger, rounder, better fed; her eyes were darkly blue and full of light, her skin as white as milk. Coming up a slight rise of ground, she saw the long figure lying against the hillside but a short distance away, and recognized it and stopped short, turning white, with a hand against her heart, all unprepared for what she had yearned to see. She went to him swiftly, and knelt beside him as he slept.

"Thank God! He hath returned — he is alive and well!" she whispered. "I had feared — oh, I know not what I feared! How hath he escaped? Ay me, but he is changed! There is that in his face which was not there before, and there is something gone from it. So thin he is — sure he hath been ill."

She hung over him in rapt absorption of tenderness; she listened to his slow and heavy breathing; she longed to draw his rough black head into her arms. Yet she dared scarcely touch him, since even in sleep he was

still too much his own; rosy and shy she leaned above him, her face transfigured. They were alone in the world, with gray empty skies above them and gray silent hills rolling upon either hand.

With one finger she touched a lock of his hair, rough and matted, and dearer to her than all silken tresses; and he lay as one dead, very far from her. She whispered his name, but not for him to hear; at the deepness of his slumber she became emboldened. She stroked the hair from his forehead with mother-tender hands; her eyes brooded over him. He was her god; out of his strength he had saved her when she was helpless, so she murmured, ready, womanlike, to glorify; now he lay broken at her feet, with lean lithe limbs relaxed, with lids down-dropped over the gray sombre eyes which never had looked love into her eyes, with lips still grim and set even in the unconsciousness of sleep. She bent her head and with her lips touched the hair that she had smoothed. He stirred, and she started, a guilty thing, crimsoned with shame; but he did not wake. Her ears caught a word, as though in sleep he had felt a warm presence near him.

"Beloved!"

And for a name she listened hungrily, but none came. Who had found a place in that deep stern heart of his? — so she asked herself with a small inward twinge of an emotion new and strange. For whom had his keen eyes softened? Who had listened thralled to the silver speech which was all his? Who had known the strength of his arms? Who had found the spell which would soothe his savage moods to stillness and unloose the flood-gates of his magic? Whose was the name so sacred that even in sleep his lips could guard it?

"That is what he wants," she murmured; "some one to love him, to understand and comfort when he is so black and bitter, and I think it is what he hath never found. Ah, pray God he may find that one!"

Because she loved, it was given her to understand. And, understanding, she caught a glimpse of the tragedy of the loneliness in which those souls must wander whose world is not the world of everyday life and love and death. Quick tears dimmed her eyes, of pity because she understood; and one fell warm on the quiet face at her knee.

Nicanor opened his eyes, without moving, but Eldris saw, and sat stiffened with fear, self-betrayed in her swift flush. He raised himself on an elbow and looked at her, smiling slightly.

"Thou?" he said, with no surprise in his voice, as though he had thought of nothing but to find her there. "I thought Nicodemus said thou hadst not come."

"I did not go to him," said Eldris. "I was at another house a little while. Now I am taken care of by the priests of Saint Peter's."

Nicanor nodded. His eyes had not left her face.

"Perhaps that is best. Why dost thou weep?"

Eldris flushed again. But his gray eyes were inexorable; they dragged truth from her in spite of all her will.

"I — thou wert sleeping, and I thought thee ill, and I — was sorry."

"I am not ill," he answered, and his voice was gentle. "But let us speak of thee. Now I have come, not so soon as I had thought to come. It was not mine to say what I should do."

"You mean — ?" Eldris said quickly. "Tell me of it. Tell me all of it, I pray you!"

Nicanor's eyes changed with the quick sweet smile which at rare times had power to lighten his face as a shaft of sunshine lights a thundercloud.

"All?" he repeated indulgently. "So, then, this is the tale."

He sat rocking gently back and forth, hands clasped about his knees, looking not at her at all, but away over the billowing hills.

"When thou hadst slipped away from the door of that torture room, I and Hito amused ourselves. And when our game was ended, he had no thought of thee nor thy escape; me it was upon whom all his loving care was centred. So it was commanded that I be taken to the lowest dungeon cell, there to meditate upon the sins which were mine. . . . I think that in all the world no man knows darkness as do I. Night is not dark; it hath the silver stars above it, and in the world the red earth-stars of men. But I was in darkness which was the darkness of the grave made manifest; it pressed upon mine eyes like leaden weights, and numbed my brain, and was a cloak which smothered me. What hours rolled on I knew not. I was fed or I starved; all was one. There was no time, there was no life, there was no death; there was but a naked soul sitting in still darkness. Five paces is my cell from wall to wall; shoulder high above the floor is a jutting stone. I doubt not that it is red with blood, since each time I passed, it scored me if I had not care."

Her shiver brought his glance back to her; with a smile he woke to recollection of her presence.

"I cry not thy sympathy, sweet sister; for there were times, and these were many, when the door of that dungeon opened wide, and Hito himself could not take from me my freedom. When I was back upon the moors with shepherds, who listened while I spoke; when I was by the camp-fires of Thorney in the Fords and men left their business at my word; and there was no darkness then in all the world. Back on the hills, where the clouds sweep free and the wind calls; back in the press of life, amid the crowding feet of men; back in the Garden of Lost Dreams, where flowers bloomed and grass was green and tender, and brown birds sang of love and life and freedom. And Hito, fond fool, rubbed his hands and thought he held me caged!"

He was very far from her again, in his own strange world; and she sat and watched him, her soul in her shining eyes, if he had but seen it, and knew she could not enter with him. He spoke more quickly; his voice fell to a deeper note, and in it was a mystery at which Eldris caught her breath.

"And out of the darkness there came a Tale to me, and thereafter there was light. And the tale is not yet ended — but it grows, it grows! Night and day it rings within my head; always it is with me, mine and mine only. But there is that in it which eludes me, which I seek and cannot find. And until I find it, the tale is not yet done. And it is of a Child, a Babe who lay within his mother's arms and smiled at all the world."

Eldris started, and her eyes, fixed upon his face, widened and filled with light. And again at her motion Nicanor came back to her. He looked at her, and his own eyes were as she had seen them once before, when

"The sight burst upon him in all its hideousness,—
where had been the stately mansion of his lord."

upon a day she had told him that the name men called him was the silver-tongued.

"Once thou didst tell that tale to me," he said, "and day or night it hath never left me since. When it is ended, and I have found this thing I seek, then I 'll tell it thee."

He took up his speech again, and she hung upon his words, unafraid to watch him since his eyes were turned from her.

"So there was a gray rat within this my dungeon cell; and at such times when the light faded and I was back therein, I coaxed and fed him, and taught him how to fight. Eh, he was a gallant beast, and his scar is yet upon my hand. He, my gaunt gray rat, and this little Christ of thine were all that kept my brain from madness those days when I sat in darkness. And in time, I, with others, was sent off to the mines, and there we labored until word came that men were needed to help our lord, who was attacked in his household by barbarians. But I was left behind when these were started, wounded by one with whom I had a quarrel about this same gray rat. When I reached our lord's house, it was empty, sacked and spoiled, and stationarii patrolled it. So I came onward to Londinium and here again was I left behind. Our lord hath left the country, and we are free to live or die as we may. I had no plan for thee when I bade thee to come hither, for there was no time for planning with Hito's jaws agape for thee." He rose to his feet and stood looking down upon her. "Now we be both alone, and there is but one thing for it that I can see. Thou must come with me. I cannot promise thee ease nor even safety, but what I have, thou shalt have also."

"With thee!" Eldris repeated below her breath, and turned her face from him. It flushed and was radiant; love brimmed over in her eyes. Was she the one who might find her place in that stern, deep heart of his, — she who might learn the spell which would soothe those bitter moods of his to stillness? Her eyes glowed and drooped. And then, slowly, across her face there fell a shadow, and the shadow was of the cross. She knew nothing of evasion; as her heart, so her lips spoke.

"With thee!" she breathed again. A sob caught her throat. In her turn she rose and faced him. "Ah, I would so gladly — so gladly! But — I can go with thee in but one way, and that way as thy wife."

Nicanor looked at her.

"Why, thou knowest that may not be," he said gently, yet with some surprise. "I am a slave, and a slave hath no rights before the law, nor to lawful marriage. It is the law. But come thou!"

Eldris turned white.

"I am Christian!" she said painfully, "and that thing I may not do. Father Ambrose teacheth that Christ hath forbidden."

"I did not make the law," said Nicanor. "Could I do so, I 'd give thee gladly the name of wife. But even thus, more of honor I could not give thee. It is not what I wish to do, but what I must do." He took her face between his hands. "Child, the law is made, not by man, but by men; and it is not for man only, but for men. Were it not found good by men, it could not be. And the law, in its wisdom, saith that a slave is a beast, a thing without rights; and I am a slave. There is no law

which could marry me to thee. . . . I cannot give thee marriage, — I, a slave."

"And I, a Christian, cannot go without," said Eldris, very low. Two tears rolled from beneath her wan closed lids. Nicanor bent his tall head and kissed them away, with what tenderness a brother might give a sister dearly loved. But with sudden wild sobbing Eldris flung up her arms and clasped his neck, and hid her face against him.

"Oh, I would go with thee!" she wept. "Heart of my heart, I would follow to the world's end, wherever thy path might lead me. I love thee, Nicanor, oh, my man of the silver tongue! and I shall love thee even till I die. But go with thee I may not — I dare not! Is this right? Were thy law and my religion made for this, to wreak such woe upon those who follow them? It is cruel, — it is more cruel than death, and I would to God that I were dead!"

Nicanor stood a moment silent, stroking her dark hair gently.

"No man would hold thee less worthy, since the case is as it must be. Never have I heard of slaves who took thy view of this. All thy life shalt thou have honor and protection. Were it in my power to mend matters, and I did not, the fault would then lie with me. As it is, it is no man's fault, and we have the right to make the best we may of it."

She shook her head, struggling with her tears. His tone changed; it deepened and thrilled until she thrilled with it; in it she heard the concentration of all loneliness and all bitterness.

"Come to me, Eldris, for I need thee sorely! All my

life have I gone chained, desiring what I could not win, longing for what lay beyond me. Must it be so again? Once one said: 'Seek thou the sanctuary while yet there may be time; and when thou art entered in all else shall be as nothing, for there thou shalt have peace.' Then I did not understand; now know I too well. That is what all my life I have never found, though I have sought in many places, and for a weary while. Therefore pray your God to pity me and all who are as I, for I am ridden by ten thousand devils — a flame consumes me which I cannot quench. An ambition is not all a blessing to him who hath it! Oh, the dreams that were mine, which the high gods gave to me, and which are gone, — gone as the smoke goes and shall never come again! The glimpse I have had of a world that should be mine and never can be mine hath shown me all that I have lost. I beat my hands against the bars, and what doth it avail? I am a slave — a slave was I born and a slave shall I die. There is beauty in the world, and I may not see it; there is knowledge in the world, and I may not share it; and my soul is sick with longing for what all men may have but I. There is a thing within me which cries panting for release, and rends me because I know not how to set it free. It is agony and delight, pain and joy beyond all naming; and once I thought it only joy. Thus ever hath it been: what I have thought would bring me peace hath brought me pain, and pain that I know not what I have done to deserve. It was not thus when I lived a brute's life among the brutes in far, gray, northern hills; there was I content, not knowing that I wanted something more. Now have I stretched my hands out to a star, and found it so far beyond my reach that for me its light is

lost in darkness which will never lift. Yet the star is shining, — but not for me."

The torrent of his speech checked. His voice dropped from the strain of its hoarse passion. He gathered her two hands closer on his breast.

"We be two outcasts, thou and I! — thou shunning, I shunned. Yet we still have each the other. Now do I come seeking the sanctuary of thy love, thy balm and healing for the hands and heart I have beaten against my bars. Wilt thou deny? Must I be turned away? Eldris, come!"

"Oh!" cried Eldris, her heart in her stricken voice. Long she looked at him, with eyes drowned in tears and lips quivering, all her struggle in her torn face. But suddenly she drew her hands from his, and slipped to her knees before him, and hid her face in shaking fingers.

"Oh, God!" she prayed, — and once Nicanor had heard words babbling so from a man upon the rack who never knew that he had talked aloud, — "keep me from going with him! I want to so — oh, I want to so! Make me strong — never let me yield to what is sin! Keep me from going with him! I love him so that I would sin for him! Dear Jesus Lord, keep me from doing that! But make me strong very quickly, or I must go — how can I stay when he so sorely needs me? Oh, God, God, God, I could comfort him so well! We cannot help it, neither he nor I. Nay, I will not weaken, — I will be strong, quite strong, — but in pity Thou must help a little too! I love Thee and the little Jesus, but I love him more — oh, nay — not more! I did not mean it!" She raised her streaming face, turning at the last from the

Power whence no help came, to the human strength beside her. "Oh, beloved, help me, for I cannot fight alone!"

So, at the need of one soul, into the world another soul was born, and the long travail of spirit rending flesh was ended.

"Dear heart, be strong! — thy will shall be my will. If it be sin to thee, thou shalt not sin through me!" Nicanor said, and knelt beside her.

Nerveless and shaken with strangling sobs, she crept into the shelter of his arms, trusting him wholly now that his word was hers, pleading unconsciously that he save her from herself and from him. He lifted her to her feet, soothing her with touch and voice, forgetting himself in her distress. Her religious scruples he could not comprehend; the gods of religion were to be invoked when one wanted material benefits from them, not held as mentors to dictate one's course in life. But since she had such scruples, and since he was learning new, strange tolerance for and sympathy with others, it was not his to blame her for them; rather to remember that though they might be nothing to him, they were all to her, and were therefore not to be held lightly. So, because he was slowly gaining the strength to think of others before himself, — and of strength this is the surest test, — and because the tenderness of a strong man is greater than all the tenderness of a woman, he soothed her and brought her peace; and, it may be, in bringing it he found a measure of it himself. She was very dear to him, — dear as one might be who was not enshrined above all her kind forever. Heart and soul he was another's, for all time and all eternity; yet life was his to live and to make the

best of it, even though there was a locked and guarded chamber in it of which the key was lost. . . .

Hand in hand they walked homeward in the faint twilight glow. He left her at the church gate, and himself turned away, back toward the house of Nicodemus, walking with bent head and broad shoulders bowed. But his face was not all sombre; something of the courage he had given her remained to him, and his eyes were softened with the new tenderness which still lived. For it is one of the compensations as well as of the penalties of life, that what one gives, one shall get again.

At the threshold sudden distaste seized him; after what he had been through, the thought of the well-meaning, brutish chatter of Nicodemus and his wife was not to be endured. He turned back again and went as far from them as he could get, down to the river-ford. Here he sat upon the beach, away from the passing of the people; and the waters rippled at his feet. The west had cleared; overhead the faint rose of the sky was paling, but across the broad river was splashed a pastel of orange and blue and crimson; and the red, misty ball of the sun was dipping below the world's dark rim.

"This is love also," Nicanor said aloud, as though one had been by to hear him. "As she loveth me, so I love. There is love of a man for a maid, and of husband for wife; and there is love of sire for child, and of a friend for a friend, and of these all are different. Yet it is all one love, touching life on every side. . . . Why, then, it takes in all the world!"

His voice changed and rang with quick and startled exultation.

"Gods of my fathers! I have found it — I have found

that thing I sought! It is love, not fear, nor wrath, nor power, that gave that little Child his power! And because it takes in all the world, this little One of whom men tell hath this love, then, for all the world. Now this is strange! Oh, Little Brother, I have found my tale, and it shall be greater than any tale that I have made before!"

His eyes deepened and flashed to the quick surge of power which shook him; now well and truly should all men name him Nicanor of the silver tongue. He was a slave, yet men should bow before him. No iron bars might longer hold him down; Fate, that mocking Fate of his, could no longer keep him chained. But over all the triumph in his face there grew also the old awe as in those days of boyhood, long ago, when first he knew himself for but the tool with which the work was wrought. His face changed and grew longing; his keen eyes dimmed. Quite suddenly he rose to his knees, kneeling as he had seen Eldris kneel, and clasped his hands as Eldris had clasped hers.

"Oh, Little Brother of the World, if thou lovest all men, love me also, for I have no one else. When I have sought love, it hath ever turned from me, prospering nothing. But since it seemeth that all men must love something, woman, or fame, or gold, it may be that it is not for me to love one woman only, but all men. If it be that I must choose, I will lose love of woman, and love of friend, and love of child; I will live alone to the end of my days, if but this soul of mine, which singeth in my loneliness, may return to me and my lips be no longer dumb. Love hath chained them; let now love set them free. And this my tale shall be strong as the wind that calls across the hills, and pure as flame,

and great as love which takes in all the world, to the end that it may be worthy. Mine it is, and mine only; I made it, and it is blood of my blood and flesh of my flesh, and none may take it from me. Yet it is all, and I am naught but the voice which speaks."

His voice sank. He sat in silence, looking beyond the sunset, his hands about his knees.

So slowly the waters closed over the sun, and the day died, and the shadow of night descended upon Thorney.

VII

OLD oaks caught the sunlight in their reaching hands and dropped it down to earth in flakes of gold; beech and larch and linden reared their tall heads above the road, and vines clung to them in woven tapestries of living green. There opened from this road dim forest aisles, veiled in dusk in which sunbeams quivered, paths of mystery, winding toward strange twilight worlds where wild wood-creatures wandered. Warm earth-scents drenched the air; soft sibilant whisperings stirred overhead, and hidden birds chattered in the leafage.

Here Nicanor sat in the dusk and gold of the forest's afternoon, his back against a gray tree-trunk, his hands about his knees. Hither every day he wandered, drinking new life from Earth's brown bosom, with idle hands and weaving brain. Here, where he had lost his vision, he was drawn back as by enchantment. He wished to dream again; to conjure forth the flying figure from the void into which it had vanished. To him it was more real than reality; for want of the substance he strove to keep the shadow in his heart.

In the spirit he roamed world-wide, with the narrow life of Thorney, its petty din and traffic, fallen away from him and forgotten utterly. Always his wandering ended in a garden, whose every path of dusky green he knew by heart, where one waited for him in the still evening light. In the flesh he lived with Nicodemus and Myleia, letting himself be waited on, worried over, caressed, to their affectionate hearts' content. No mood of his was too wayward for their sympathy; when at nightfall, after long hours of brooding, he would chant strange tales by some crowded camp-fire, than theirs were no voices quicker in wonder and applause. That they understood not half of what he said mattered nothing to their fondness; yet to Nicanor it was this one thing which mattered all. Nor were they the only ones who listened and loved his words. Many a fretting soul he lulled to quiet by his magic; to many he gave pleasure whose pleasures were all too few. Once he had scorned them, these simple children of plain and forest, whose emotions he could mould as a potter moulds his clay; in his high pride he had thought that these were not the worlds he was born to conquer. Now he loved them; to bring a moment's brightness into some gray life, a moment's forgetfulness of pain to one who suffered — this it was his to do. For, as once he had thought to move the hearts of kings with his power, so now he knew that a king's heart is no more than man's heart, and only he may move the one who can move the other. And every heart that he won he laid in spirit at the feet of his lost lady, who had taught him the Master-word of the tongue of men and angels, without which faith and hope can profit nothing, nor can any heart be won.

NICANOR: TELLER OF TALES

A thicket of briars and underbrush hid him from the road. For drowsy hours he had looked through his tangled lattice upon the life that went up and down the highway, himself unseen, — a pedler, bent under the weight of the pack upon his shoulders, making wry faces at his blistered feet; a farmer, mounted on his clumsy two-wheeled cart, returning from the markets of Londinium; a chariot, gay with paint and gilding, with two young nobles arguing over the races at Uriconium; and between all these, long intervals of sun-steeped stillness, when the world drowsed and insects shrilled in the untrod grasses.

Later there came northward toward Londinium a funeral train, on the way to the cemeteries that lined the road outside the town, weaving in and out among the checkered shadows, stately and slow and solemn in its pomp of death. There was a bier, draped with a pall of sable velvet, and drawn by four white horses, pacing slow. Slaves and clients went on foot before and behind it; and beside it there walked a man, tall and of lordly bearing. His hand rested on the bier's edge; his face, bowed upon his breast, was scored with sorrow. There was dust upon the richness of his mourning cloak; and dust also on the plumed trappings of the horses, and the garments and the sandals of the slaves. This pilgrimage of love and sorrow had been no easy one, nor short. Nicanor, peering through the brambles at the sombre train, read the story in the man's face, where tragedy sat frozen. At once his mind's eyes saw, beneath the embroidered pall, a fair dead face, great eyes closed, and lashes drooping on a marble cheek, two hands folded on a pulseless breast. In a heart-beat it was as though a

veil had lifted, and he probed the depths of one phase of the world's tragedy; through one man's sorrow he looked into the sorrows of all men. By his own pain he felt himself made kin to all those thousands of the earth who knew pain also. The feeling lasted but a moment, and was gone, leaving him with hushed breath and shining eyes.

"Here have I found another chord of life to play on," he said softly. "And when it is touched there is no human heart but must answer. So thou also hast lost her, O friend! And yet, perhaps, after all, thou art happier than I. There are things worse than death, as I have found. At least . . . she is all thine!"

When the turn of the afternoon had come, and while he lay watching gnats dancing in a shaft of golden light that fell athwart the trees, his ears caught voices from the road, and the click of a horse's feet against a stone. A woman laughed; and again he parted the brambles and looked out. The road was splashed with sunshine and shadowed by the trees which arched above it and hid the sky. Down it, with faces turned from Thorney, two came toward him, — a girl, sitting sideways on a great bay horse, leaning to the man who walked beside it. She was fair, with long hair lying in a golden sheen upon her crimson mantle. She rode steadying herself to the horse's stride with a hand upon the man's shoulder. He, tall, fair also of hair and skin, with blue eyes laughing under flaxen brows, in a brown leathern jacket and brazen cap which caught the sun in small sliding gleams of light, led the horse by its bridle and looked up at her as she talked. Down the green forest way they came in the mellow shade and sunshine, fair as gods, radiant in their

youth and life and happiness, with eyes for nothing, ears for nothing, save each other.

"It is Wardo!" said Nicanor, in surprise. "Sure I had thought him on the way to Gaul."

He pressed through the thicket and stepped into the road. Wardo saw him, and dropped the bridle with an exclamation, and ran forward.

"Thou!" he cried, and fell upon Nicanor in a storm of joy. "Thou great rascal, I had thought thee dead. Where hast been that thou didst not seek me? When didst leave the mines? Hast heard of what befell our lord? Oh, I have hungered for thee, to tell thee the good fortune which is mine!"

The horse came up to them, with the girl in the crimson mantle sitting stately on its back. Her eyes were blue and shining; her cheeks were flushed with the rose of life. Nicanor smiled at her and at his friend.

"So, Sada?" he said, with a note in his voice which neither caught. "All is then as it should be?"

"Ay, promise you that!" said Wardo, a hand on the girl's knee. She smiled down into his eyes. "She is mine now. This day did I take the gold to Chloris, and the cage-door opened, and my bird was free. My bird now, and no other man's."

"Thine!" she murmured, radiant.

"When our lord departed for Gaul, I was left behind in the confusion." So Wardo told his tale. "Well, perhaps I need not have been, had not the gods willed it so. Therefore I was my own man, and could not be held to account for it, since my lord ran away from me, not I from him. So I joined those East Saxons who are moving down upon us from the Fens, and henceforth my lot

is cast with them. For some of these I repaired swords, bucklers, what not, since my old trade is not lost to me, and for my work they gave me gold — ay, much gold. And with the gold I bought Sada. Now we go forth to seek our nest; where, we care not. She is mine, and I am free. Ye holy gods, but it is fine for a man to own himself and call none other lord! No man ever more shall hold me slave to him. Henceforth we be rovers, this star of my life and I. Come thou with us, friend! If thou stay here, thou 'lt be held no better than *erro,* a landless, masterless wanderer, who is fair game for the law and for all men. Had my lord stayed, thou knowest that I too should have remained faithful. He being gone, we must fend for ourselves as best we may."

Nicanor shook his head.

"Nay, I stay here. Go thou thy way, and may thy faring prosper. Now tell of our lord and his escape."

Wardo laughed.

"Ho, there was work which thou shouldst have seen!" He told of Wulf, and of the fighting which was done within the villa; of the flight from the house, the long ride by cart-track and highway to Calleva, with his lady crouched in front of him and her hair blowing over his hands. And here Nicanor broke in.

"Thou there with her, and I — Tell me, man, was she hurt or frightened? Did she swoon or weep?"

"How could I see?" said Wardo. "I stood, and she kneeled before me. And little did I care whether she wept or swooned, when the grays were plunging like to tear my arms from my body, and it was all I could do to keep upon two wheels. There went my lord ahead, and

here pounded I after, and alongside rode my lord Marius, watching his wife and itching to be back and have it out with those reavers. I saw it in his eye. Eh, that was a wild night. We made the Bibracte road, and doubled back eastward, and so rode for Londinium. But at the second miliarium from Bibracte the grays gave out. So my lord Marius took my lady upon his saddle, and they all went on, bidding me follow as soon as might be. But by the grace of the gods, I was too late. When I reached the port, my lord and his people had set sail for Gaul. Well, then, if thou wilt not come with us, when things be settled, and a man may know better what to look for, I shall come and seek thee, and we will have a talk over old days together, and spill a drop or so to Bacchus. Until then, comrade o' mine, farewell."

They grasped hands, and Sada smiled a farewell at Nicanor. The two went on, then, and left him standing there, and he watched them pass away into the glinting light and shade until Sada's crimson mantle was lost in the green gloom of trees. He took his slow way back toward Thorney, musing as he walked.

"This day mine eyes have looked on life and death, and all that death mourns and life clamors is Love, Love, and again Love. Strange that something all men must love, who cannot live for themselves alone, no matter how they try."

He came down from his dreams at the stepping-stones of the marsh-ford, to find himself all but overrunning a child who stood upon the bank and wept because he feared to cross — a small atom of a man, with little tunic torn and puckered face of woe. At sight of Nicanor he ran, and flung himself against his legs, with the sure

confidence of babyhood in all the new, strange world, and clamored to be taken home.

Nicanor stooped to him with a laugh, recognizing him as the son of one Julius the Tungrian, a field-hand belonging to the farmer Medor, whose estate lay between the hills a half-mile from Thorney.

"How now, manling? Why these tears at thy first venture into the world? How didst stray so far from mother's skirts? Dost wish to go home?"

"Ay, home!" wept young Julius. "Thou wilt take me home!"

"Come, then," said Nicanor, and swung him to his shoulder, and turned back from the ford to the road again.

It came upon him then that this was the first time that ever he had held a child in his arms. Always before had children run from him, learning, like their elders, to shun him: now he knew why. The softness of the round little body thrilled him oddly; the touch of the clinging hands, the baby weight upon his shoulder, called into life emotions such as he had never thought to know. A child, a little living child, her child and his. . . . The thought stirred him suddenly to his soul; and with the thought a fresh bit of the Scroll of Life unrolled before his eyes, — that Scroll which slowly he was learning how to read. His heart caught another phase of the old experience of the world, the high pride and joy of fatherhood. Again, as once before, he got a flash of new, strange light into the hearts and minds of all the world of men, as with the parting of a veil; found a new chord under his hand to be struck into pulsing life. All unaware that on a day his lady had said, "His son could I love, and be proud that

he was mine," he marvelled at himself and at his feeling, and still more at the little one that had such power to wake it.

He reached the farm of Medor, and stopped at the cabin of Julius, whom he knew, which stood at the edge of the estate. Through the open doorway he could see, in the obscurity of the one poor room within, a woman's figure, bending to rub her man's back, bruised and raw from the harness of the plough, with ointment of herbs — a nightly proceeding regular as the evening meal. When she had done, he would take his turn in rubbing her; since it was not enough for women to be the bearers of children, but also they must be hewers of wood and drawers of water as well. She rose to straighten herself from her task, and saw the tall figure coming doorward, with the little one crowing upon his shoulder. At her exclamation, Julius, rugged and mossed as a sturdy hemlock, came to the threshold to look over her shoulder, stripped to the waist, his neck and arms shining with the grease.

"Here is thy son, O Kalia!" said Nicanor, halting. "He was by Thorney, weeping because the world was not large enough for his adventure."

The mother received her son with tender welcome, but he held his arms out to Nicanor, whimpering to be taken back.

"He runs away to play with boys while I am in the field, the wicked one!" she said.

Julius looked down at her and at his boy with proud eyes. When he was drunk he would beat his wife, but she loved him because he loved their child. Nicanor looked at the three.

"He is worth having," he said, very soberly, nor thought that his words might sound strange to them. He smiled at the boy, and left them with the mother's thanks following him.

And Julius, watching him across the field toward the road, said:

"Mark you how the boy hath taken to him? Dost remember, before he went away from Thorney, how children ran from him, and even folk feared him and his gall-tipped tongue?"

"I remember," Kalia answered. "Even I have punished the child by saying, 'The black man Nicanor will get thee if thou stop not thy crying,' until for very fear he ceased. Never have I seen one so changed as he. Juncina, the fish-wife, with whom I spoke but yesterday on Thorney, saith that each day he goeth to lame Gallus, the blacksmith's son, who is dying of a fever, and telleth him tales until the little one sleeps. And when folk give him money for his tales, he will take it, though he never asketh it, and of it he will give half to those three old men whom each day he tendeth. It is not so long since he hath been back on Thorney, yet even so all men wonder at the change in him. Verily, I think that he must be in love."

"That is ever all you women think of!" Julius grumbled. "Were you to have your way of it, it would be love that worketh all the miracles, cureth all the illnesses, taketh the place of all the gods. Now come and rub; I am sore in every joint and sinew."

Nicanor went home in a brown study, seeing never Kalia's broad, homely face, untidy wisps of hair, brown bosom covered by her coarse gray kerchief, but that face,

young and fair and tender, which in his dreams had become mingled with that Other Woman's face with holy eyes, who was the Virgin Mother of all love. When he thought of this one, it was to think of the other, no longer woman merely, but idealized and uplifted into all that he could imagine of purity, a something too fine for earth. In place of humble Kalia, he pictured that fair patrician face as his soul's eyes saw it, glorified with the mother-love upon it, brooding over a round little head in the hollow of her breast. Holy gods, the maddening, sweet mockery of it! He shook himself as one who throws off a weight upon him, and turned in at the house of Nicodemus, whistling, with aching throat and sombre eyes of pain.

It was later than he had thought, and the evening meal was over. This troubled him not at all, for in that house he was sovereign lord, and knew his power. Myleia and her ursine spouse served him quite as though they had been his slaves. A roasted pigeon hot from the coals, beans cooked in oil with garlic, a cake of barley-bread baked in the ashes, honey, and a pitcher of wine — no lord could have fared better than their idol.

Nicodemus carried an empty platter to Myleia in the kitchen, showing it to her with immense pride.

"He hath eaten all!" he rumbled in a rasping whisper. "The first time these three weeks. Come! that is doing better. We'll have him around yet, my girl — this spoiled baby of ours."

"Who spoileth him?" she retorted, pinching his ear gently. "Thou art worse over him than a mother whose babe hath cut its first tooth. Thou art foolish in thine old age, my great ugly bear."

"Soul of my heart, a man must find something to be foolish over!" he declared, vastly pleased. "And it is high time I left off being foolish over thee. Eh, sweeting, what sayest thou?"

He ruffled her hair with his great hand. Nicanor looked in upon them from the threshold.

"At it again, thou old lion and his mate? Thou also!" he said, and smiled at them. "I go down to the ford — there be a party of men riding over the hill. Wilt come, Nico?"

The two went forth into the evening, leaving Myleia to watch them with fond eyes of pride from the low doorway.

Along the street people had begun to gather, with more of curiosity to see what might be seen than of apprehension. Woodmen with bundles of fagots on their shoulders, fishermen with strings of fish, itinerant wine-sellers rattling strings of horn cups, with skins of cheap red wine, vendors of the black sticky sweetmeats made of the blood of beeves mixed with rice and honey, — all these ceased to cry custom for their evening trade in interest at the arrival of the strangers. It was long since such a crowd had descended upon Thorney; trade might be improving. Women, ragged, with more ragged children clinging to their skirts, came from the fisher-huts upon the beach to gaze across the marsh.

And across the ford, on the crest of the long gentle rise of hill over which the straight road ran, came riding a troop of horsemen, carelessly, without order, in a tangle of waving spears and gleaming helmets. No merchants or townsfolk were these; and a tingle went through the crowd at the sight of weapons. Those were days when

none knew what to expect from hour to hour. The oncomers cantered down the hill and into the waters of the marsh-ford; and it could be seen that they were for the most part fair-skinned, and every man bore a round buckler of bullock's hide upon his arm. At once a whisper flew from end to end of Thorney:

"These be Saxons!"

The name had become a word with which to conjure. The crowd upon the beach increased. Nicanor and Nicodemus stood in the forefront of it and watched.

The leaders of the party — an old man with white drifting beard and hot blue eyes, and a young one, with tanned face and brown, curling hair — rode out upon the shingle with stern faces set straight ahead. Those behind them were more free and easy as to bearing; a man leaned from his saddle to scoop up water in his hand; there was joking in low tones, and deep-throated laughter. As they drew nearer to the people, waiting silent, it could be seen that they had with them a prisoner in their midst, bound upon his horse and wounded; and at sight of him a murmur fluttered through the crowd. For he went in the dress of a Roman noble, torn and stained with blood, his head sunk forward on his breast, his right arm in a sling — a pitiful object, were there those to pity.

With the crowd Nicanor and Nicodemus followed the Saxons as they rode along the main street. Questions flew from mouth to mouth:

"Who is this lord, their prisoner? Whither take they him? How did they capture him? For what come they here?" But to these no man could give an answer.

VIII

HEREAFTER Fate, the grim, smiling goddess, took into her own hand the shuttle of Destiny and sent it flying fast through the warp and woof of Life. For when they came to the river's brink, the tide was in, and the waters of Tamesis, too deep to ford with safety since the moon was full, swirled past them in their swift rush from the sea.

The Saxons halted on the beach, dismounting, while the leaders conferred, and the prisoner drooped pallid in their midst; and the men of Thorney seized upon their chance for trade. An hundred mouths to feed was a boon not to be despised in those lean days. There sprang up a horde of wine-sellers, men with poultry, with produce, and with meats. The two leaders rode away to seek an inn, each attended by a servant. A fire was kindled on the beach, where in other days so many fires had blazed; for a brief while Thorney took on a semblance of its former thriving self. Mingled with the sounds of trade and barter there was heard the dry, thin rattle of a sistrum from a temple of Isis where priests and worshippers were gathered for hidden rites; the voices of men singing, the neighing of horses.

Here, on the river side of Thorney, the beach was wider than upon the marsh side. The houses grouped themselves in black, irregular masses behind this beach; and to the west, a short distance from the water's edge, rose the low stone wall which bounded the land of the Christian church. Fishermen's huts were crowded at the foot of this wall; and along the sand were strewn rotting spars and timbers, and there were boats drawn out of reach of the tide. Old houses, wrecked by fire and time, leaned their tottering walls above the alleys at strange angles, settling slowly into the ruin of age. The round moon hung stately, low in the eastern sky, drowning in radiance the garish glare of flames; houses stood out sharp-cut against its light, and strange shadows flung across the crooked cobbled streets. A broad path of silver glinted on the inky waters of the river. The smell of fish and tar rose strong above all other scents.

The Saxons, hungry and weary from their march, ate hugely and drank deep. Horns of mead and beer were drained and filled; white wine was as good as red. They talked with the men of Thorney, in strange Latin, with much gesticulation and interpolation of Saxon words. Among the many figures on the beach, black in the mingled light of moon and flame, was ceaseless motion, kaleidoscopic and bewildering. Thorney woke to a lusty gayety, born of deep drinking; of recklessness, even, such as she had known rarely since the old days of the legions. Laughter became louder; quarrels, short and fierce, arose as hot blood mounted with the fumes of wine. Into the air there crept a tension, the intangible effluvium of excitement which precedes the arousing of the crowd. Quite suddenly the spirits

of people were raised to fever pitch; the boisterous vigor of the Saxons was infectious.

Nicanor soon lost sight of Nicodemus. He stood among the people, regarding the scene with eyes of detachment. As always in a crowd, an odd sense of impersonality possessed him, of aloofness; in it he was forgetful of his own presence, of his own corporeality; became as a Mind seeking out its own. Here and there he was recalled by a man's greeting; here and there also a woman spoke. Everywhere he was hailed cheerily, as one comrade by another. Jests were passed to him, for which he gave as good as he got. There was that in their intercourse with him which proved him one of themselves, an intimate sharer in their pleasures, their sorrows, their lives. Yet he was the man who not so many years before had in this place been baited as men bait a bear — the surlier, the better sport.

A red-lipped flower-girl, on the way home from her day's business in Londinium with her basket of remaining blossoms, was pressed against his shoulder in the outer edge of the crowd that watched the Saxons feed, as boys gather to see the wild beasts of the arena tear their meat. She turned, saw him, and laughed with gay raillery.

"Couldst even thou, O Silver-tongued, make of these great guzzling cattle a tale?"

He looked at her with quick artist joy in the vivid color and effect of her, — red lips, cheeks as brilliant as her roses, black eyes, midnight hair in which a crimson flower was tangled. In her laughing glance, her care-free joyous innocence, he caught a hint, gone as swiftly as it come, of that Other who held his soul. Now he

understood the heart and inmost meaning of it; it was the all-compelling Womanhood, the sacred spark, guarded and precious, which set men's hearts aflame; and for him, henceforth, because of that one, it made all women sacred. He answered her, banter for banter.

"What would the world be without cattle, O Flower-maiden? And why not a tale? There is a tale in all things, if one but look to find it — in every bud and leaf and flower — in these Saxons — in thee, little sister to the rose!"

"That is pretty," she cried, dimpling. "Here is a bloom in payment; once it was as fragrant as thy words. May they never lose sweetness like a flower which fadeth!"

Reaching up, she thrust a flower behind his ear, as a young fop of the nobility would wear it, and sprang away into the crowd laughing.

"The wish of innocence should be good omen; the gods grant it!" said Nicanor. He pushed onward through the press to get a nearer view of the Saxons; and heard as he came a great voice shouting a rhythmic chant.

Over the shoulders of those in front he could see a ring of Saxons surrounding the man who sang. As they listened they drank, and as they drank grew more emphatic in applause. The singer was a bull-chested fellow, purple-faced with his exertions. He swung his sword, he roared, he heaved himself upon his toes; and Nicanor, fellow-craftsman and maker of words, eyed him and smiled a smile of pity.

The shouting ceased; the man cast himself upon the ground and called for wine. Nicanor touched upon the

shoulder one whose face showed that he understood the words.

"Friend, who is this dainty warbler, and what the burden of his song?"

"Who he is I know not," said the man, with a grunt of laughter. "What he sang was the greatness of his people, and their skill in war. Tell thou them a tale, Nicanor; these Saxons will listen all day to tales, and give good silver to the teller."

Nicanor shook his head.

"Nay; perhaps they understand not Latin over well, and I had rather that they understood than that they gave me silver. Now what are they going to do?"

Two men dragged the prisoner forward into the circle of the firelight. He was afoot, but the hand free of the sling was bound to his body. That the poor wretch knew what they would do with him was plain; he cringed, and cast hunted glances around the ring of firelit, curious faces.

"I am Felix of Anderida, a Roman lord!" he cried in a high voice, his pale eyes wide with fear. "If there be any Roman among ye who will free me from these Saxon wolves, I will give him gold as much as his back may carry!"

A Saxon raised his hand and smote the lord upon the mouth, so that blood began to trickle down his chin.

"Cease thy bleating, thou white-eyed sheep!" he growled in Latin.

"That is not right, to strike a man unarmed and bound," said the man beside Nicanor. "I think our backs could carry a goodly sum of gold, eh, friend? These fellows be half drunken; it should not be difficult

to get him free of them, and after, make him pay. I am of the collegium of smiths in Londinium, and I see many of my fellows here who would stand with me. Also, we could summon the militarii unto us and let them settle the matter; it is not lawful that these Saxons make away with a Roman after this fashion."

"I can hold them, if thou canst summon thy fellows quickly," said Nicanor. His tone was quite assured. "But it must be done at once, before they have worked themselves up to mischief over him."

"Do thou so then, and I will shake a staff aloft when he is safe," said the man, and slipped away among the people.

Before Nicanor could make his way through to confront the Saxons, who were preparing for brutal sport with their prisoner, the horses of the two chieftains broke through the ring and the riders dismounted in the open space. The lord Felix twisted away from those who held him and ran to the younger chief.

"Call thy fellows from me!" he cried. "Each time when thou art not by they seek to torture me for their sport."

The brown-haired leader folded his arms across his chest and looked down upon his prisoner. He spoke, in Latin sufficiently fluent.

"Hast thou forgotten that I am Ceawlin, son of that Evor whom thou hast slain, and that my foot is upon thy neck and thy blood shall be let out in payment for my sire his blood? How then shouldst thou say what may or may not be done with thee, thou little toad?"

It was then that Nicanor came into the torchlit ring, walking carelessly, a song upon his lips. He stopped

where the light fell fullest on him, facing the chieftains, shapely as a young pagan god in the strength and flower of his manhood, the red rose behind his ear. The speech of Ceawlin broke and stopped; his gaze fastened upon the intruder with the swift recognition of one strong man for another.

"Who is this man?" he said sharply. None answered; his own people did not know, and no one else seemed ready to stand sponsor. Ceawlin spoke again. "Who art thou, fellow? Art thou also of the Welsh?"

For as Briton was the Roman word, so Welsh, or wælisc, a foreigner, was the Saxon word, meaning merely one who was not of Teuton race, and given to those nations which spoke the Latin tongue.

"I am a Briton," said Nicanor. "Men call me the teller of tales, and I am come to buy from thee thy prisoner. What price wilt thou put upon him, O son of Evor?"

"How knowest thou me?" Ceawlin asked doubtfully. His voice became angered. "What price, quotha! No price that thou canst pay, sir teller of tales!"

"So? Didst ever hear of that ancient sea-king who put too high a price upon his spoils?" said Nicanor, with a laugh, choosing simple words that all might understand. Before Ceawlin had time to speak he swung around upon the listening men, standing tall in the ruddy light, his head thrown back to shake the hair from his eyes. "Listen, O friends, for it is a good tale, such as ye know how to love. Five black ships, dragon-prowed, rode out of the night, upon the black seas, upon the foam. Long were they, and lean, and swift as the vertragus, the hound that outspeeds the hart. Winds roared behind them; great birds swooped through the storm across their way;

great waves rushed under them as they rode with rocking spars. Spray swept across the faces of those who manned them, as the hair of a woman sweeps across her lover's face; crashing they reeled through lifting seas, and swam to the crests of curling billows rimmed with pale fire, and the thunder of their going outroared the clamoring storm. Know ye the yell of the wind in the straining cordage, the heave and fall of the plunging deck beneath your feet? Know ye the sting of brine upon your lips, and the savor of the salt winds in your lungs, O ye sons of Evor?"

A deep breath went through the circle, as though a breath from the outer seas had filled men's nostrils. Ceawlin licked his lips as though he had thought to find them stiff with salt.

"Ay — we know!" he said deeply, his eyes alight. "Hast thou then been also upon the seas?"

Nicanor laughed low.

"Nay, never I!" he said. "But I see that ye do know."

"Go on!" spoke a voice, impatient, from the circle.

They were his, every man, and he knew it. In his first words he had struck the chord which answered true in them, these lawless sea-rovers; they were his to play upon as a musician on his lyre. The sure instinct of his art taught him to tell of those things which they themselves knew best, which were nearest to them, to their own lives. The ring held silent, awaiting his next word, bearded men who leaned upon their spears and iron swords, and listened. They had eyes for none other than he, this tall youth with the black hair and the eyes of steel, who stood before them in his careless pose of triumph, with his red rose thrust behind his ear; who

knew what they knew, felt what they had felt, made them see what he saw, and held them in the hollow of his hand. Caught up in his swift imagery, even they forgot their prisoner, who, it seemed, was further to one side, less in evidence among his guards. By now the Romans had drawn closer to the ring of Saxons, so that there was one dense crowd about the open space — much narrowed now — where the chieftains and Nicanor stood.

Not for nothing had he listened to the talk of the deep-sea fishermen and the whalers who frequented Thorney, and stored in his memory all that they could give him. In his tale was the clamor of the wild north wind, the scream of wheeling gulls, the groan of straining timbers, the rush of bubbling foam beneath sharp prows. He told of swift battle fought over heaving waters, whose jaws yawned for their dead; and men hung upon his words. He told of the red medley of the fight; of the heavy fall and sullen splash of bodies into the grave which waited; of ships that grappled in their death-throes like wrestling men and sank locked in their grim embrace; of defeat and triumph, of high courage of men who lost, and the higher courage of mercy of men who won; and men's faces grew eager, who themselves had lived through scenes such as these, and themselves had watched the death of gallant ships.

Nicanor glanced over the ring and saw that the prisoner had disappeared, leaving not a ripple in the crowd to mark his trail. The absorbed faces of his hearers, and the sense of what was being done behind their backs, seized him, and he smothered a laugh. His voice flowed on, deep-toned, vibrant, working his magic upon them, talking against time.

Somewhere in the outskirts of the crowd a horse neighed loudly; there was a flurry among those people nearest the sound, and high over men's heads a staff was shaken. Nicanor's speech broke midway; this was the signal, and he no longer cared whether or not he held them. In that instant the spell was snapped; men stirred and whispered. And suddenly a shout of warning and anger went up —

"The prisoner! The prisoner hath gone!"

Forgotten were the tale and its teller; the inner group of Saxons surged into commotion and uproar. There was a rising storm of assertion and denial. Ceawlin strode to Nicanor, his link armor clashing softly as he moved.

"Now do I believe that thou hast had to do with this!" he cried in ready anger.

Nicanor laughed.

"Perhaps after all it had been better if thou hadst paid the price, lord Saxon!"

Swift words sprang to Ceawlin's lips, but the elder leader ran to them, shouting something in his own tongue. Ceawlin turned to answer, and Nicanor slipped away.

Face to face he came with a woman seldom seen beyond her jealous doors; a fat and shapeless bunch of garments topped by thin hair streaked with ruddy dye, a high white marble brow, an old face deeply lined. The woman was looking at him keenly, with boring vulture eyes. She spoke swiftly, in a voice clear-toned and silvery as a bell.

"I heard thee speak. . . . Once, long years ago, stood I in this place and heard a boy speak, an elfin, wolf-eyed child, who came out of the night and spoke with an unchildish tongue. Often since have I thought of him and

the power within him, for though I was young in years yet was I old in knowledge, and I knew that never had I seen one like him. Into his hand I put a piece of silver, and I think it was the first that ever he had touched. Art thou that child?"

"Ay," said Nicanor. "That child was I. So it was thou who first didst teach me that silver could pay for souls." He thrust a hand into the pouch that hung at his belt and drew forth a broad piece of silver, holding it to her. "But I think it must be clean silver that pays for mine, O Chloris."

The woman flinched oddly. Both had forgotten the rising tide of excitement around them.

"Nay," she said. "I will not have it back. Canst not leave me the thought that there was one gift which I gave honestly — or is it with thee as ever with stony-hearted youth, swift to condemn, slow to understand?"

"Why should I condemn thee?" said Nicanor. "That is not mine to do until in me is nothing to condemn. Nay, rather could I pity thee."

The heavy lids opened slightly over Chloris's eyes.

"And wherefore?" she asked with a hard note in her flute-like voice. "If I pity not myself, why shouldst thou pity? Am I not loved, and have I not loved greatly? Have I not riches beyond thine imaginings?"

Nicanor laughed low and softly, his keen eyes on the old face.

"Love thou hast never known, O Chloris," he said gently. "In all thy long life of wanton ease, thy long life in which children might have leaned upon thy knees and children's voices might have called thee blessed, love thou hast never known. Who could not pity this? Or

thy name would not be upon the lips of men in the market-place. When men love, think you they make common talk of what they love? When women love, keep they not themselves pure for love's pure sake? Ay, truly I could pity thee, because some day thou wilt so pity thyself, in spite of thy riches beyond mine imaginings. That is all."

"Thou art over strange," said Chloris. "And I would I had not spoken with thee. After all, what doth it matter? There is always the end, when darkness comes and the wax is wiped clean."

"Is there?" said Nicanor. "Is there an end to anything upon the earth?"

"Now thou art foolish," said Chloris. Her eyes were unchanged, but her voice was angry. "In truth there is an end, and the end is — death." She spoke with the deep-rooted and universal distaste of all Romans to the direct reference to death. "Must not all things be gathered to the shades? And is not that the end of them?"

"Believe it, then, for so long as thou canst, for thou wilt be the happier for believing," said Nicanor. "And if some day it come to pass that thou dost believe differently, remember then what others have found, that only love can save thee — the love which thou hast never known. Were it not wise, O Chloris, to seek it while yet there may be time?" He paused, and his eyes forgot her. "I am seeking now," he said below his breath, and turned away from her into the crowd.

Chloris looked after him a moment with lids half dropped over her changeless eyes.

"The breath of the gods hath breathed upon him, and he understands. Oh, ay! he understands." She laughed,

a silver tinkle which was not wholly mirth. "Will it ever come to pass that Chloris, the greatly loving, will rejoice to know that there is one who pities her? We shall see!"

But meanwhile affairs had changed on Thorney, even during the moments of Nicanor's speech with Chloris. The throng upon the beach, no longer orderly, was heaving with excitement. The Saxons, spreading in all directions to search for their prisoner, were in no mood to care what offence they gave. They plucked brands from the fire, using them as torches, and started for the village, while men and women retreated before them, not knowing how far trouble might ensue. But before they reached the village, a body of militarii, hastily summoned, came forth from between the houses to meet them. The officer commanding them sprang upon a pile of lumber, shouting to the Saxons, who halted, as it were irresolute.

"While ye remain in this province it is right that ye should obey its laws! If this Roman whom ye have taken hath committed crime against your laws or ours, let him be tried by these laws. Otherwise will we not give him up to you. He is a freeborn Roman, and is not to be done away with as a slave. If ye make oath to grant him trial, we will deliver him unto you."

Ceawlin, the hot-headed young chieftain, pulled his long sword from its bronze sheath, pointing with it to the figure upon the lumber-pile. His face flamed with red rage; he shook his sword and shouted to his men behind him. There was a rush; before the Romans could prevent, a score of Saxons had leaped upon the pile, dragging down him who spoke; and the first blood on Thorney had been shed. It was the signal; like warring

currents of the sea the two forces clashed. The beach was alive with figures, struggling, shouting, or swaying in deadly silence in each other's grip. Light flickered snakelike along uplifted blades which shot above the sea of heads. It was a fight hand to hand, primitive, blind with insensate rage, ever-smouldering, which wanted but the spark of excuse to flame into the full flare of battle. The resistance of the militarii was speedily overcome; outnumbered, lacking their leader, they broke and fled. The Saxons, with shouts of triumph, gave chase over the stony beach into the streets of the island, bent on the recapture of their prisoner, and on wreaking vengeance upon those who had dared oppose them.

IX

THAT night, in the house of Juncina the fish-wife, kneeled Eldris at the window of the loft where she slept, looking out upon the house-tops with her shoulders gleaming white through her loosened hair. Through the window moonlight drifted, showing the squalor of the loft, and the bed where Sosia, the daughter of Juncina, lay asleep.

Into the night she murmured love-words, happy in her dreaming, calling to her love across the darkness.

"Is he in the wine-shop of Nicodemus, or is he in the moonlight by the fords, telling his tales to those who crowd around him? Doth he think of me, whose thoughts are all of him? Or have I angered him over-deeply? — for never have I seen him since that day I said him nay. Ah, Nicanor, was it love that said thee nay? This hour might I have been lying in his arms, Love's happy handmaid — so happy! What if I had yielded? I so want his love! What would God care? Mary, Mother, keep me from these thoughts! I would that I could see him now — this same moon doth shine upon him somewhere. Thou old moon, how many maids hast thou looked down on since the beginning of the world, who

have kneeled at windows, and thought of a man, and been foolish?"

Sosia, in the bed, awoke, turned on her back, and raised herself upon an elbow, showing her flat and heavy face above the blanket pulled to her chin. She spoke drowsily, in a voice thick with sleep:

"Hath the moon bewitched thee quite? In truth I think thee off thy wits with love. All these nights hast thou been foolish, and waked me from my sleep. Wilt not come to bed, thou cruel girl?"

Reluctantly Eldris undressed and got into bed beside Sosia, who slept again, heavily, with stertorous breathings. The night breeze blew freshly in the window; from the village dogs barked, and the distant voices of men reached her. Somewhere in that press was he, in the midst of the tide of hurrying life; and her heart went out to him.

So she slept, deeply. Once or twice she tried to waken, as one strives to rouse from dreams; but the black swoon of sleep held her fast; body and soul she was drowned in the soundless depths of oblivion. But suddenly she was awake, startled, and somewhat dazed. Her first thought was wonder as to what had waked her; her next, that it was not so late as she had thought, for the noise at the ford still continued. More, it seemed increased. And even in the first moment of full consciousness which followed her waking daze, a sound grew out of all the noises of the village; a long mellow note, like the note of a deep-toned hunting-horn, vibrant yet steady, filling every cranny of the air. At once she knew it was this that had awakened her. It hung a moment, sweet, unearthly, haunting; and dropped back into an outburst

of fierce clamor that leaped at it as hounds leap at a stag. Eldris put out her hand and shook Sosia.

"Sosia — waken! Dost hear that strange sound? What is it? Never have I heard such a sound before."

She scrambled out of bed and went to the window, her feet shining white on the rough floor. She saw other faces appear at other windows and at doorways of dim hovels; there came black figures of men from lanes between the houses, running from the river-ford. The sharp clatter of the feet of a galloping horse clashed for a moment through other sounds.

"It is but a drunken brawl," said Sosia, sitting on the bed, a blanket about her bare shoulders. Her tone was indifferent; drunken brawls were no new things on Thorney. "Come back to bed."

"I think that something hath happened," said Eldris, and started to dress. "Dress thyself quickly, Sosia, and let us go out to see. It is not so late — the moon hath not left the window." This was true, although the wide pool of light upon the floor had narrowed to a silver bar.

But the room was lighted suddenly by a ruddy glare which leaped into it from without; a gust of voices swept beneath the window like the rising of a wind; there came the sound of many feet, as though a crowd had gathered before the house; cries, and the rattle of weapons. Again Eldris ran to the window. She cried over her shoulder in a frightened voice:

"Oh, blessed Peter! there be armed men entering all the houses in the lane! Haste thee, Sosia — let them not find thee naked here. I will go down and see —"

Below, the voice of Juncina cried:

"We harbor no fugitive here, I tell thee! Here be none but I and my two maids!"

Eldris, climbing down the ladder with hasty feet, saw that the room, fogged with gray smoke, was filled with half a score of men; saw Juncina struggling in a corner, held by two; saw others overturning the scanty furniture, slashing with their swords at fish-nets and bedding, thrusting their torches into every nook and corner. She would have stumbled up the ladder again out of their sight, but a shout told her that she was seen. A great fellow seized her, dragging her from the ladder; in his grasp she fluttered like a rag caught in a briar. Another pulled her from him; she was in the midst of mail-clad forms that towered over her, drink-flushed faces, brutal with greed, that leered down upon her, hairy hands that grasped at her. Her captor she eluded, and another, her breath coming in dry sobs of terror; at her desperate doublings, like a frightened hare, their shouts of laughter told that the sport was very well to their liking. The doorway, close at hand, broken open and unguarded, offered a chance. She darted through it into the night, into another world of terror, in which sinister sounds met her on every side.

In a blind panic of fright she ran, thinking at every step to feel a heavy hand upon her; in the narrow lane she ran, jostled by those who fled beside her. Flames from burning houses threw their glare over fights which occurred in every street and lane, in which wounded men and dying crawled from beneath the feet of combatants into the shelter of black doorways. A band of horsemen galloped up the lane, overriding those who crossed their path, with shouts of "Death to Britons!"

Eldris saw them coming; saw the mouth of an alley black on one side, a slit between houses scarce wide enough for a horseman to ride through. She dived into it, stumbling now and again into the gutter which channelled it. She began to sob with fright and exhaustion as she ran.

"Lord, let me find him, or I die of fear! He will save me — with him shall I be safe. Take me to him — let me find him, for my love is stronger than am I." Fear swept her from all the rationalities to which she had clung; out of the tumult and the terror in which she struggled, love rose like a wave and claimed her — the passion which was stronger than she. God was very strong, without doubt; but without doubt also He had many souls to guard that night, and it was the strength of a man's arm she wanted.

So she reached the end of the alley where it opened into the street of the fords, and crouched behind the elbow of a rambling wall, looking out warily, a hunted thing, to see if further faring might be safe.

The broad paved street was lighted by flames from a house blazing fiercely opposite her; and figures ran to and fro before it like imps gone mad. Other figures there were also, which lay very still upon the roadway in the crimson light, with their black shadows crouched behind them. There was a rending crackle from the heart of the fire, and shrieks and shouting from those around it; and under it all the dull roar from all Thorney which never ceased. And quite suddenly Eldris knew that she was listening to a sound that came out of the din around her, the sound of men's voices, singing in unison. In that hour and place it was to her more dreadful, more a thing

of terror, than even the cries which it was drowning. The voices came nearer; and at that in them, for all her fear, the blood thrilled through her to her finger-tips.

For in them was the very spirit of the fight, of lust and blood and fierce exultant triumph; barbaric and pagan, they were reckless with a pitiless pride which feared neither gods nor men nor devils. Eldris crouched closer against the sheltering wall as though it had been a sentient thing to aid her. So she saw a line of men, on foot, approaching; and the line reached from side to side of the wide street. Each man walked with arms across his fellows' shoulders; and their song kept time with their swift marching feet. The red light of the burning houses fell upon them, on their reckless faces, and glinted on their shirts of link-mail which clashed as they moved, on their crested caps of metal, and on the weapons which hung at their sides. They swept all before them as they came; plunderers left their work of outrage and slaughter and fell in with them, taking up their song. The first line passed; and Eldris saw the reason of their triumph. For those in the rear dragged with them a prisoner, a small man, battered and bloody, with one arm hanging in a torn sling. She could not see his face, but her heart turned to water within her. The song sickened her with an overpowering sense of her own weakness against all that it signified of brutal male strength; it dominated her, and before it she shrank and shivered. But now her terror was not all for herself alone, but for that one who might be also in their hands, prisoner to them even as was this poor puppet prisoner. She started up, with a cry which was drowned in the rhythm of the terrible song as ever the cries of women have been drowned in the song

of the fighting, and fell back in a huddle against the wall, with her face hidden on her knees, sobbing:

"Christ — oh, Christ, save him! Mary, save him, or let me die with him!"

When she found her way back to life, Thorney was wrapped in silence and illimitable gloom. The light of the burning houses had died; the shouts of men and shrieks of women and the fierce song of the Saxons had ceased. Yet there were other sounds which grew out of the darkness as she listened; a thin far wailing, like the ghost of grief, and close at hand a man's deep voice, very low, broken by sobbing.

"Soul of my heart, where art thou! All the night I have searched and cannot find thee, dead nor living. The curse of all evil be upon these Saxon swine! They have slain her — my woman! — and she is dead! No more will she lie beside me when the dark swims in the hut. — O light of my life, could I but hear thee call me once again thy great ugly bear! Eh, thy bear is a sad bear this night, my lamb!"

Eldris stumbled to her feet, covering her ears with her hands. She also was seeking and could not find. She started running from the dreadful sobbing voice, picking her way as best she might in the wreck and ruin of the Saxons' trail.

Long she searched, and everywhere met others, also seeking, and yet others who had found what they had lost. Torches flashed in and out like fireflies among the darkened lanes; from houses left unscathed came the wailing of women who had brought home their dead. The air was heavy with smoke, so that the eyes smarted and the throat stung.

Into the face of every man who passed her she looked with eager eyes of hope. Every man's body that lay in street or lane she hovered over with caught breath and eyes of fear, nerving herself to stoop, to turn the dead weight that settled sullenly into itself as her hands left it; to scan the face by the light of her flaring torch. And the light showed her as ghastly as what she looked on; black hair streaming like smoke behind her, eyes wide with fear, pinched face glimmering pallid. No joyful handmaiden of Love looked she, going to love's embraces, rather a wild thing, terror-ridden, possessed wholly by the frenzy of her love. Strange faces she looked on in her search among the living and the dead; bearded faces, boyish faces, but never that face she sought.

To a dead man's side she flitted, like a spirit of the night; and on her knees, holding her torch to a face with light staring eyes and open jaws that seemed still to shriek a last despairing curse at her, she caught her breath with a stifled scream. For the shock of thick hair, cut below the ears, was black and coarse; and the half-naked body, from which the tunic had been stripped, was long and lean. The torchlight cast quick shadows upon the fearful face; and sometimes to her eyes it was the face of her love, who had died terribly, and sometimes it was the face of a stranger. She began to shake.

"I cannot tell — oh, God, I cannot tell!" she wailed. "Is my mind gone, that I should not know thee? I must know — how can I go further until I know?"

With wild eyes she looked about her. She was in the open space of the market-place, — alone, save for the thing at her feet, and for other things huddled here and there around her, — a silent battle-ground from which

the hosts had departed. The carcass of a horse lay near, and her torch struck points of light from the metal of its trappings. A dog ran by her on padding feet, its fangs dripping, its tail between its legs. Eldris thrust the torch into the earth, that it might stand erect. She knelt beside that silent screaming figure, and the light flashed from the white bared teeth of the open mouth, and showed dark smears of blood upon the face. She laid her hand on the shoulder, and the clammy cold of the dead flesh sent a spasm of sickness through her.

"If it is thou I will kiss thee," she moaned. "I will lie upon thy breast and put my mouth to that mouth of thine. And I must find out — what if I should pass and leave thee here? God give me strength — I must find out! Whose own mother could know him so?"

She wiped blood from the face with the skirt of her tunic; she forced the stiffened jaws together, so that the horror took again the likeness to a human face; while her breath whistled in sobbing gasps and her flesh crept and crawled with horror. She bent and peered into the poor face that no longer seemed to scream at her, holding the jaws shut with tense and shaking hands. And then she sat back upon her heels with a strangled sob of relief and nerves far overwrought, wiping her hands furiously upon her skirt and crying:

"It is not thou! Dear Christ in heaven! it is not thou! How thou wilt laugh when I tell thee, beloved — when I tell thee that a dead man screamed at me and I thought him thee! How thou wilt laugh — and I shall laugh with thee!"

Sobbing, she began to laugh, a laughter strange and cracked like the laugh of a very old woman, that mounted

high and higher, welling from her throat as blood wells from a wound; and rocked herself to and fro and stared into the face of the dead stranger with wide eyes of unreason. . . .

She took her torch and fled on, and the face that she had left behind seemed to scream its mockery with open jaws through the darkness after her.

X

DICANOR was half way up the beach when the stationarius went down and his men fell upon the Saxons. Instantly, nothing loath, he found himself in the midst of the fighting. He was unarmed, save for his knife; so that his first thought was to get within the length of the long swords of those attacking him, since at close range, these, built for thrusting, were as good as useless. This was not easy to do, for the Saxons, despite their bulk, were light upon their feet, and wary to keep their opponents at sufficient distance. But twice he did it, each time forcing his adversary to leave his sword-play and take to his dagger, the terrible seaxa which had won for the Saxons their name.

He went into battle joyously, cool-eyed, alert, heart and soul in the work ahead; yet ever with that other self within him, which stood apart as a spectator in the arena, and watched through the smoke and crimson light of battle the faces of those who fought, — the fierce delight of one, the black hate of another, red wounds, and the swift black swoop of Death. His heart sang its high song of triumph which his lips would fain have echoed, of thanksgiving in the clean strength of his

manhood, in the power of his arm, which could uphold his own before all men. He stooped to catch a sword from one who needed it no longer; and heard the soft clashing of links of mail beside him and felt the breath of a great horse that stirred his hair. Above him the voice of Ceawlin cried:

"Thou tale-teller, thee I seek! This is thy work — that dead-eyed toad is gone, but it is thou shalt pay the price for him!"

He straightened up, the sword in hand, a laugh upon his lips; and a bolt of red fire entered into his side and seared him to the vitals. He fell; and the horse's tread jarred him and shook the world as it passed, spurred by its mail-clad rider with the blood-tinged spear.

At first he fought to keep his hold on consciousness; knew that the fight surged over and around him, but with those who fought he seemed suddenly to have no part nor lot. They faded into spectres, beings somehow set apart from him, in whose affairs he no longer had concern. He lay quiet, his eyes closed, the red flower behind his ear, the red flower of his life staining the trampled sands on which he lay. Quite suddenly he drifted into a gray empty world of twilight, in which he wandered seeking for what he did not know. He became aware, presently, that on the other side of this world, at the end of the road of Time, there was a little narrow door which would lead him into his Garden of Lost Dreams, and he thought that if he might reach it, all would be very well with him. But across the world, from out the twilight, there appeared a tiny point of light, ever growing, ever brighter. It came upon him as a rolling ball of fire, and he turned and would have fled from it; but it enveloped him in

rose-red light that burned and blinded, and he knew that it was Pain. It lapped over him like water; it shrivelled him, soul and body; it entered into the marrow of his bones and twisted him in every joint and sinew. And suddenly he found his soul following the fight into the streets of Thorney; he was plunged amid the slaughter, in the smoke of burning houses. Yet through it all he knew, with strange inner knowledge drawn from the deeps below consciousness, that his soul was in his body, lying quiet on the sands in the dark and moonlight, and that the fight had passed him by.

Out of the flame-shot darkness of his oblivion a sound came to him; and the devil-lights that danced before his eyes ceased their wheeling to listen — a bell, deep-throated, majestic, that tolled once, and out of its sonorous, slow throbbing that lingered in the air, a voice intoning.

"Ave Maria, gratia plena,"

The bell-note boomed again.

"Benedicta tu in mulieribus."

Again the heavy clanging shook the air.

"Sancta Maria, Mater Dei, ora pro nobis,
Nunc et in hora mortis nostrae!"

The voice drifted from him; yet the air seemed alive with the vibrations of the words. *"Ora pro nobis!"* Who was the Mary full of grace who could pray for one, to whom one could call as men called upon the gods? Who but the Mother of Jesus, the Little Brother of the World, sweet comrade of his black and bitter hour? He smiled as one who hears names well known and well beloved.

"*Nunc et in hora mortis nostræ!*" Who was that mortal one for whom priests prayed in the silence before the dawning, for whom the hour of death was striking in the tolling of the bell? "In the hour of our death" — not one death only was prayed for, but all deaths. But then the words took upon themselves new and startling meaning. He knew that the hour had struck for him also in the great bell's voice; was that prayer for his death among all others — for his, the pagan's? With sudden lonely longing he wished it might be so, as one who starts upon a journey wishes for a friendly voice, a handclasp, for farewell. Would Mary pray for him; would the Little Brother bring him solace as in that bitter time before? If this were so, could not one go down into death, as one had gone through life, with a song upon his lips? What, after all, was death? For the first time the question of Life was launched at him from the vastness of infinity; and he, poor atom of mortality, with his bright tongue and his groping heart, his longings, his hopes and fears and ignorances, was called upon to answer. Was it full of terrors, the terrors at which men hinted and dared not speak? He knew that he was not afraid. Was it lonely? He did not feel alone.

But his thoughts were fluttering from him like birds rising from the grass; slowly darkness closed above him, in which he struggled as a drowning man to keep his head above the waters. Again he stood upon the edge of the gray twilight land, and saw that something was coming to him — a mist of light, cool and pure as pearl. It grew, and out of it there looked down on him a face, young and fair and tender, with holy eyes. It was the face of his lost Lady, yet her face transfigured as his eyes

had never seen it, — the same and not the same. The mist grew brighter and he saw that in her arms there lay a babe that leaned its head against her breast and smiled at all the world. At once he knew them for his Dream made manifest, and his face lightened to adoration.

"O Best Beloved!" he whispered, "how mine eyes have hungered for thee in the dark days that are gone over! My lips would sing unto thee even as my heart is singing, but my tongue is black within my throat. I have found that who would seek for peace must pass through pain, and when pain hath ended, peace shall come. When therefore it cometh to my body, as it hath come upon my soul, then I shall sing my song to thee, — my song, which thou and little Jesus did teach me how to make, I will sing to-morrow when the moon shines on the fountains, in the garden."

His voice died; he saw his Lady lean to him from her mist of rose and pearl; cool as the dews of morning he felt her hand upon his head. Very softly then his fever left him; love's touch soothed the red flame of pain that ate his life away, as in the long ago love's touch had stilled the bitter soul within him. He smiled happily, for that soul's pain and body's pain had brought heart's peace. With no surprise, he knew that he had found the answer.

"I think it is the door of the garden," he said clearly.

XI

A KEEN sweet wind blew over the world, first pure breath of the coming day, driving before it the reek of smoke and blood and death which hovered over Thorney as a pall. A tinge of gray light diffused itself like mist through the darkness; in this mist the forms of people wandered like dim restless ghosts seeking the graves from which the night had called them. Out of the stillness which had succeeded to the turmoil of the night, cocks began to crow, a homely sound, as though this dawning held no difference from the peaceful morn of yesterday. The ripples of the river woke, gurgling like a happy child that laughs itself out of dreams.

Eldris came out upon the beach from between the rows of tottering houses. She cast away her torch and stretched her hands to the east, where momently the earth was turning from black to gray, steeped in a haze as of twilight, the strange half-light of dawn.

"O day, come swiftly and give me back my own! I shall put my hands upon his breast and say, 'Take me, for I am all, all thine and love's, and where thou goest there will I go also, for my God is love. I am only

woman, and weak and very weary, and I love thee. Ah, dear God! I would leave heaven and all the angels for thine arms!' And he will take me in his arms, and I shall fear nothing any more. O day, come swiftly!"

Along the beach she hastened, light-footed, and came to the lumber-pile, with no more than a glance for the Roman soldier who lay upon it, his duty done. And so, behind the lumber-pile, with but a strip of gray sand between his bed and the broad river, she found him, with the dawn-light upon his face.

As once before she had gone to him and knelt beside him as he slept, so she thought to go to him again. But this time she would not fear to wake him, for he, her lord, had called her, and her delight was to obey. She had come to yield herself his, body and soul forever, and in her face the bridal joy outshone the bridal terror. She would do this and that; thought to play with her joy to taste the sweetness of its savor; but suddenly all her thought was lost in the flood of love triumphant which rose to overwhelm her. She ran forward, her arms outflung to him, crying:

"Beloved, wake, for I am come to thee! All my soul is a flame of fire, and the fire is love which blindeth me to all in earth and heaven save only thee. Wilt thou not wake and take me?" On her knees she threw herself beside him.

But he did not move, nor did he speak in answer.

And even in the moment of her exaltation, Eldris understood. Her words broke; an instant she knelt with arms outstretched above him; she ceased to breathe, and her face froze into lines of stone. But suddenly she gave a cry, loud and sharp, and her hands fell upon him.

Her eyes awoke into living terror; with desperate fingers she strove to turn his face further to the light. At the weight of him she shook and shuddered; she had felt that horrible dead weight before, that sullen settling into itself of his bulk as her hands left it. In the gray light of the slow dawning she turned his face toward her, gray, and smiling, and still. She looked down upon him and put her hands to her throat.

"I am glad, ay, glad, that thy mouth is not open and screaming at me!" she said aloud, in a dead voice.

The sense of her words smote her, and she closed her eyes with a long-drawn whispering moan.

Again she looked at him, scarcely believing; and once more the flood overwhelmed her. She wrung her hands and brought them down before her face.

"Oh, God, is this Thy punishment for that I said my God was love? Very well — punish Thou me, then — what canst Thou do that matters now?"

Her voice faltered; she lowered her hands to stroke the hair from his pale forehead. She sat upon the sands and drew his heavy head to her knees, and her voice sank to the crooning of a woman with her man-child that is dead.

"I am too late — too late — too late! In mine ears was the wailing of the women in empty houses — how knew I that my voice must cry among them? My love, that liest so quiet at my knee, thou art gone very far from me, and all my tears and pleading may not call thee back. O pale lips sealed forever, all thy magic dumb within thee, give me of thy power that I may mourn my love! O wandering feet that have strayed in lands of bright enchantment, thou walkest in the dim

paths of the twilight places, and I would that my feet might follow! O strong hands that have wrought the work of men, why dost thou not answer to the clinging of my fingers? O heart that camest through bitter waters, was it good to rest? I and old Sorrow walk hand in hand; for the red flower of my lover's life which is withered here, we shall cover him with lilies. The young men and the maidens shall walk softly; the old shall mourn him saying 'Eheu! it is not well for the young to go before us.' And I — what is there that I may say? Dead — dead — dead — and my heart is breaking — Ah! bitter woe is mine! O ye Elder Gods, would ye have been more kind than the One who hath torn him from me?"

She bent over him so that her tears fell warm upon his face and the veil of her hair shrouded him; she kissed his lips as though she would breathe her own life into him.

"This my bridal kiss I give thee, O Nicanor, O my dear! — here on thy mouth, and thou canst never know — God have pity! — thou canst never know! Thy lips are cold — so cold — thou art all cold, and even my bosom may not warm thee. My love, who didst die with a flower in thy hair and a smile upon thy lips, why is thy face so bright with triumph? Peace lieth upon thee as a garment. . . . O Nicanor, Nicanor, give me of thy peace!"

There fell a voice upon her weeping:

"My daughter, what dost thou here?"

Thin-faced Father Ambrose stood before her, very gentle, very old, from Saint Peter's Church within the wall. On his arm he bore a basket filled with simple dressings; his brown frock, up-kilted, was stained with

blood and mire. Perhaps all night he had done his work of mercy among the dying and the dead.

"I have found him!" said Eldris. She swept back her hair with one arm, showing her sorrow.

The priest knelt, touching here and there with skilful fingers.

"Is it not he whom men called Nicanor? Nay, daughter, weep not so bitterly! Is it not the death he would have chosen, being man? We have heard of him; we have seen that his power he hath striven to use for good, so that many loved him; we have thought that in God's own time the light would come upon him and he should be baptized into the Faith."

But Eldris broke in fiercely:

"Ye have heard — ye have seen — ye have thought — but can ye give him back to me? I knew not your God was a cruel God; ye have taught that He is the Father of all mercy and all love. What mercy is there in this that He hath done? I am Christian, for I wished to seek love from that God that is thy God; and this my love did I try to make Christian also. But since God hath done this thing unto him and me, I am glad that he was not Christian and hath not gone to God!"

Father Ambrose looked down upon her, smiling, and his face was holy.

"I think he was a better Christian than art thou, dear child, even though he did not know it. Can one be Christian, for all he cries 'God, God!' if he have not Christ within his heart as well as on his lips? What is a Christian, save one who dealeth gently, liveth cleanly, giveth of himself? And such an one, I think, whether he professeth all gods or no god, will our Father call

'my son.' Long have I lived, and very much have I seen, and I think that this is so."

He paused. Eldris's sobbing alone made answer.

"Daughter, thou sayest thou art glad he hath not gone to God. Loving him, wouldst thou not rather think of him with God than wandering lonely in the outer darkness?"

But Eldris flung out her hands with a bitter cry.

"Nay — nay — oh, Lord Christ, not that! I cannot bear to think he wanders lonely, as all his life he hath been lonely — anything but that! What have I said — what have I done! Oh, father, father, he must not be lonely! Pray thou that God will take him, even though he did not know! Dear God, let him into heaven — do not Thou be angered because he did not know! Mary Mother, pity him and let him not be lonely any more!"

She stretched her hands in desolate appeal over the still face at her knee. Father Ambrose gathered them into his.

"God hath taken him, dear child," he said gently. "Out of his darkness hath he entered into light; and I think that it is well with him."

A long time he looked down at the face that smiled in answer; at the long lithe limbs whose strength was dust. From his basket he took a cup, and went aside and filled it with water from the river, and offered it to God. Returning, he knelt, and with the water signed the cross on the pale forehead and the broad pulseless breast.

"So sign I and seal I thee with the Cross of Christ, that in His mercy thy Lord may receive thy soul. 'Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.'" He raised his

hand, and Eldris dropped her face to the rough black hair and sobbed. "The Lord bless thee and keep thee. The Lord make His face shine upon thee and be gracious unto thee. The Lord lift up His countenance upon thee and give thee peace."

His gentle voice ceased, and a moment the earth hung silent, awaiting the mystery of the dawn. Then the red misty sun shot up over the hills on the east of Thorney, and the bright new day was come.

THE END